



## CONE OF SILENCE

When the inquiry into the crash on take-off in Pakistan of the new Phoenix jet airliner—rival to the Comet and the pride of British aviation—found that the accident was due to “pilot error” on the part of the captain, George Gort, there were few to dispute the verdict. Gort himself was certain that he had obeyed to the letter the instructions laid down by the manufacturers, that he had flown exactly “according to The Book”. But everyone else concerned either with the aircraft company or with the private enterprise airline which had put the Phoenix into service was convinced that Gort had been at fault. Indeed, it came as an unpleasant shock to Hugh Dallas, the airline’s training captain, when he heard that Gort was to be given a second chance. Could it be right to entrust these machines—a priceless asset to the country, in design and performance way ahead of all competitors—to a man who had once failed? These are the ingredients of a story of tremendous tensions and tragic implications.

*By the same author:*

THE TAKE-OFF  
THE HEART OF THE STORM  
THE PROVING FLIGHT

DAVID BEATY

CONE  
OF SILENCE

A NOVEL



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**FOR B.**



# ONE

"Sir, with respect . . . may the model be handled carefully? It has cost the Company whose brief I hold a considerable expenditure of money."

With infinite gentleness, Sir Arnold Hobbes laid a miniature aeroplane on the table in front of him. Stepping back a pace, he put his hands on his lapels and raised his elbows shoulder-height. For a few moments, he stood quite still, his white-haired head on one side, looking at the model almost lovingly, admiring with a connoisseur's eye its shape, its lines, its details.

It was beautiful! Perfect! The portholes were real perspex: inside could be seen the tiny seats, the manikin passengers: there at the front sat a blue-coated captain and a first officer, each behind their own sets of lilliputian controls. Four jet engines lay in neat pods beneath the swept-back triangle of the wings. The fuselage flowed with tapering streamlined symmetry to the treble tail.

Sir Arnold gave it the smallest push forward. The little rubber tyres squeaked on the polished surface. Slowing to a stop, the nose-wheel angled over to starboard. In one of those conversational asides for which he was famous, he said to the pilot on the other side of the table, "Pretty, isn't it?"

Captain George Gort had sat in that seat all morning and most of that hot afternoon. Around him, like a sea of quarantine, was a waxed wood floor, dividing him from the dais where sat the Commissioner between his pilot and engineering assessors, the tables of counsel, the Ministry of Civil Aviation officials, the press benches, the advisers, the public gallery of this packed-out, stifling, oak-lined court-room. His arms were folded over his chest. His face was red, and rather fleshy: thick lips under

a clumsy nose: big convex cheeks and a heavy chin. Black balding hair streaked with grey lay across his huge head. Two large eyes of surprising blue—periwinkle blue, incongruous in that powerful, salty, wind-blown face—regarded the model with almost doe-like solemnity, before passing a professional opinion: “It’s well done.”

Tiny details like the hydraulic pipes to the wheels, the oleo legs, the under-carriage doors, the moving rudders and ailerons and elevators, even the cabin door handle. The colouring, the aerals, the markings were exact. Even the registration: G-AKVF. The words tolled, like the voice of a judge before sentence: Golf Alfa Kilo Victor Fox - —

“Sir.” Sir Arnold had commenced his address. “If you will bear with me . . . I would wish the Court to imagine that this table is Ranjibad airport. Here”—his thin fingers swept an imaginary path over the flat wooden surface—“is runway 27. We have, as you see”—he could not help again touching the top of the model—“Phoenix Victor Fox, owned and operated by the British Empire Airways, manufactured by the Atlas Aviation Company, whom I have the honour to represent, under the command”—he gave a nod and a friendly smile at the pilot—“of Captain Gort. Now I want us all to bring our minds back four weeks in time. It is the night of May sixteenth—”

The well-modulated voice had taken on the tone of telling a story. The interest, which had been flagging for the last two hours, now suddenly revived. Fewer papers rustled. Water, which had been constantly gurgling into glasses, now remained still and warm in the carafes.

Only George Gort turned his head away from the standing figure. He knew this story by heart. Now, conscious that he was sitting in the sun, that his mouth was dry, that he was sweating, that he was tired, he looked almost longingly through the tall windows that side by side glass-panelled one whole length of the long court-room.

They faced south. They looked out on to a park. The sunshine of this June heatwave was still out there, too—hotter, perhaps—but at least there were lime-trees, shadows under the elms. Waiting for tea-time, nursemaids gossiped together: the

prams stayed still: the old men lay asleep: unmoving couples, stretched on the parched grass: a few children splashed in the water of a fountain.

He was aware of the soft voice going on around him, the words coming up and bursting quietly in his mind: "*the Phoenix*, a jetliner, a most magnificent achievement of British brains, the most advanced of its kind. My clients are naturally as concerned to piece together exactly what did happen that night as British Empire Airways are, as Captain Gort is—"

Hearing his name, he returned his gaze to the pale face of the Queen's Counsel, seeing him, it seemed, through a mist of heat.

Sir Arnold, concern in his voice, had broken up his narrative. Now he was brisk, upright, hands stiff behind his back: "Sir, I have complained these past nine days that there are no shutters or blinds of any kind on the windows. It is unfair to the witnesses! Poor Captain Gort has been sitting here in the sun for hours. It is not right that he should be asked to think clearly under such intolerable conditions! It is uncomfortable! It is unnecessary! It is grossly unfair . . ."

And without waiting to hear the reply of the Commissioner who agreed with him, had objected to the man in charge of Court Rooms and their equipment—Sir Arnold was over at the other side of the table, suggesting that the pilot should move his chair, there was a little more shadow over *this* way. He poured out a glass of water from his own carafe.

Gort took the water gratefully. He drank. Then he put the empty glass back on the table, and signified that he was ready, by fixing his blue eyes expectantly on the man standing above him.

"Now Captain——" Sir Arnold said the words respectfully. He was addressing an expert, and his tone implied he knew it. "I don't want you to think of this as a cross-examination. We're putting our heads together, you and I, to try and find out *why*." The well-manicured fingers were again stroking the model. "The truth," he said. "We must find out the truth of this puzzling enigma."

"The truth . . . yes, of course."

As though satisfied now, Sir Arnold walked back to his place underneath the dais, and raised his eyes to the Commissioner and the assessors. "Now, Sir, we have already heard in the course of this long Inquiry, various *theories*. Victor Fox, with eighty-nine passengers, six crew, full tanks and four tons of freight was at its maximum permissible take-off weight of 170,000 lb. Was the loading such that the aircraft was dangerously tail heavy? Did the wind suddenly change on the runway, so that the take-off was attempted *down-wind*? Did the brakes bind, thus retarding the achievement of flying speed? Were the engines giving out their full power or did they suddenly fade? What happened?" He slowly turned to ask with his eyes all the faces in the court, and repeated: "What happened?"

Nobody answered. A heavy blanket of silence hung over the hot court-room.

"Nothing like it has happened in the past. The Phoenixes had been in operation for three months before the accident. And since, they have continued flying to many parts of the world *without any incident or accident whatever*. Yet it happens on this single occasion, close on midnight in the middle of May, on a *particular* runway of a *particular* airport in a *particular* country to a *particular* Phoenix - Victor Fox - under the command of a *particular* pilot—Captain Gort." For a full minute, Sir Arnold paused. "Again I ask you . . . *why*?"

Undaunted by the same silence, his fingers kept lightly stroking the model. "That is what we are here to find out. That is why this expensive toy has been manufactured. With fearless impartiality, we must probe for the true cause . . . and thereby ensure that such an accident in the future can take place *never again*!"

He picked up a sheaf of papers sharply from the table. His lips had gone thin and determined. A frown of concentration straightened his eyebrows. His hand shook - perhaps from emotion - but when he spoke, his voice was that of one colleague to another at a discussion round a board-table: "Now Captain Gort and I are going to see what we can do to bring this problem nearer a solution."

He smiled at the pilot, who edged his chair a little closer to rest his arms on the table.

"The time is 23:37, Ranjibad local time. Here"—he pointed to the little figure in the left hand seat of the model—"is Captain Gort. Beside him"—his finger switched to the figure in the right hand seat—"we have First Officer Lambourne. Captain Gort has already calculated from the Atlas Company graph that in these conditions of weight and temperature the unstick speed is 118 knots, has signed the Load and Trim sheet, the Customs declarations, the mechanical serviceability sheet. He is satisfied that everything is as it should be. All four engines are started—though Number Three takes longer than usual. Mr. Lambourne obtains permission to taxi, and Captain Gort"—carefully he pushed the model slowly forward, swung it at the edge, so that it faced the full-length run of the table—"taxies slowly out to the take-off position at the end of Runway 27. Now, Captain—" He turned, and almost like a pupil under instruction asked: "What do we do now?"

"Brakes on. Before Take-off Check."

"We put the brakes on. We check everything. We find the engines satisfactory."

"Well . . . the jet pipe temperature on Number Three was high."

"But not sufficiently high to return to the ramp?"

"No."

"Now we . . ." He smiled deprecatingly and shook his head. "I must intrude no longer . . . you are ready to roll?"

"That's right."

"And then?"

"Mr. Lambourne obtained clearance."

"And what was the clearance the Tower gave you?"

"We were cleared take-off; cleared to climb on course to 42,000 feet; to report leaving five and reaching seven; Great Circle to Cairo."

"Anything else?"

"Wind variable, three knots. Temperature 88 degrees."

"What sort of a night was it?"

"Dark. Very hot. Spitting with rain."

"And the ceiling?"

"Low."



“You could see the lights on either side all the way down the runway?”

“Through the haze . . . yes.”

“Could you see the two red boundary lights at the far end, do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“But you could see no horizon?”

“No.”

“Just dark night all round you, except for the yellow runway lights stretching out to the red boundary lights?”

“Yes.”

“Had you any inkling whatever that this would not be a normal take-off?”

“None.”

“And what did you do then?”

“I pulled the curtain behind the pilot’s seat tight shut.”

“That was to keep out the glare of light from the rest of the Flight Deck?”

“Yes.”

“Except for the green phosphorescent numbers and needles on the instruments, Mr. Lambourne and yourself were sitting side by side in complete darkness?”

“Yes.”

“What about the landing lights?”

“I don’t use the landing lights for take-off. There is no regulation about it.”

“I see. And what happened then?”

“I turned to Mr. Lambourne and put up my thumb.”

“You didn’t say anything?”

“No.”

“And what did he do?”

“He put up his thumb, too.”

“And afterwards?”

“I opened all four engines to full power. I released the brakes. The aircraft began to move.”

“So?” Under Counsel’s lightly laid fingers, the model left the edge of the table. “Fairly slowly, I take it, because of the hot temperature and the fact that you were so heavy?”

"Yes."

"Then faster." The little wheels spun round in the sunshine; a spindly, ostrich-legged flat shadow dragged behind the triple tail. "The runway lights were flashing past, one by one?"

Already two feet of table was consumed.

"Yes."

"Mr. Lambourne called out 75 knots?"

"Yes."

"You pulled back on the control column?"

"It is at that speed I have been instructed to lift the nose-wheel off the ground."

"So?" Holding up its front leg, tilting its nose the model sped past the centre. "The red boundary lights were clearer now?"

"Yes."

"You had not reached the unstick speed?"

"No."

"Did Mr. Lambourne make any comment?"

The little aeroplane pounded on and on.

"He said, 'Go! . . . we're eating the runway!'"

"That made you concerned?"

"Not particularly."

"But he was obviously worried?"

"Not exactly worried. We both knew . . . from graph calculations . . . that we would use a lot of runway."

"It was just a remark, you think?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

Less than a foot of the table remained.

"He called out, '118 knots, at last!'"

"And you moved the control column back for the unstick?"

"Yes."

"So?" The model's nose went higher. Sir Arnold's long white fingers tightened, as though trying to drag it off the surface of the table. "But Victor Fox still stayed on the ground?"

"At first . . . yes."

"Then did it lift?"

"Yes . . . but just a few inches above the runway."

“Then it sank again?”

“Yes.”

“By pulling back on the stick”—the model’s nose went higher still—“you tried to get airborne?”

“I *eased* back on the stick . . . yes.”

“But there was no feeling of flying speed?”

“The controls seemed the same as usual. There is a mechanical ‘feel’ mechanism.”

“I see. The same as usual, but the aircraft would not fly.” Sir Arnold paused to give the pilot a slight smile, before proceeding: “But it was too late to do anything except go on?”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

“I still tried to get airborne. I tried easing the stick forward, but I didn’t seem to be getting a proper response.”

“You went on trying to get airborne till the red boundary lights went by?”

“Yes.”

The little model had stopped, two inches from the edge of the table. Sir Arnold relinquished his hold on it. His hand withdrew into his trouser pocket.

“Did you call out anything to Mr. Lambourne?”

“I called out, ‘It won’t come off.’”

“And did he say anything?”

“He shouted, ‘It’s no good! No good!’”

“And then?”

“The Phoenix started to bang up and down on rough ground. I slammed the throttles back. There was a tremendous jerk . . . a terrible grinding noise. I felt the left wing collapse. The aircraft shuddered, then stopped very suddenly. I smelt smoke.”

Gort’s lips closed. He appeared unwilling to go on.

Gently, Sir Arnold prompted him: “And afterwards?”

“I pressed all four Emergency crash buttons. I shouted, ‘Electric and hydraulic switches off . . . abandon aircraft!’ Then I got out of my seat, and went aft to the passenger cabin.”

“It was dark in there, I suppose?”

“Yes . . . but I had my torch. I helped the steward open

the main door. The passengers were all right. There was no panic. They filed out of the aircraft. After I'd made certain the cabin was empty, I went forward again."

"To check that the crew had all left?"

"Yes." Gort hesitated before going on. "Through the smoke, I saw Mr. Lambourne was still sitting in his seat. I called out, 'Alec . . . get out, for God's sake!'"

"And then?"

"Then it struck me he was hurt. His head was lolling on one side. I rushed up and shone my torch in his face . . . and then I saw he was dead."

Sir Arnold Hobbes lowered his white-haired head. The outstretched tips of his fingers just made touching contact, each with the other. "I wish to join my name with that of the Atlas Aviation Company in expressing our very real sympathy with the relatives of First Officer Lambourne on their tragic loss." He paused. "Yet at the same time, we must thank God for the providential escape of the other ninety-four souls on board from what . . . had the Phoenix been a conventional aircraft with 9200 gallons of petrol in its tanks instead of the far less inflammable kerosene . . . would certainly have been a raging, inescapable inferno."

A silence - respectful, awed, reminiscent - hung over the heat of the room, tried to muffle the sunshine. Shadows - longer now, slanting, black--striped the pale oak panelling. Death made its proper presence felt. Eyes downwards, nobody moved.

"Captain . . ."

The pilot's bright blue eyes stared sightlessly ahead.

"Captain Gort ----"

The standing figure of the Queen's Counsel, the quiet faces of the Commissioner and his assessors, the contours of the court-room at last seemed to make their focused imprint on the pilot's vision, as Sir Arnold continued, "You have given us a clear picture. But unfortunately, that does not solve the problem. Calculated on the temperature, the density altitude, and the weight of the aircraft, you had ascertained from the graph in the Operations Manual - and correctly, too - that the aircraft's unstick speed was 118 knots." His body bent so low over the

table he could have been asking the little motionless model: "Why then did the Phoenix fail to rise?"

It did not answer him. Smart, sleek in its paint, dumb—it waited instead for Sir Arnold to proceed.

But he did not. Instead, he reached out for a glass of water, drank slowly, thoughtfully stroked his chin. He took a large white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. His eyes closed. Momentarily, he appeared at a loss, groping in the dark for what to do next—unsure, uncertain, appealingly human.

He pursed his lips, as though through a straw he was sucking enlightenment from the surrounding air. Then suddenly, his eyes flew open. Impatiently he stuffed the handkerchief back into his top pocket. Perhaps he had been inspired, for now he moved with a calculated determination. "Now I'd like, if I may, Captain Gort," he said, "to take us back to the time when you lifted the nose-wheel off the ground . . ."

Again he took careful hold of the model, and drew it backwards till it was once more in the middle of the table.

"Now, Captain"—it was a compliment, he was smiling—"what is not in question *at all* is your own health and strength." The affability increased. "That is evident for all to see."

George Gort had heard him. He nodded.

"Now the Phoenix controls are power-assisted, are they not? The elevators are particularly sensitive?"

The pilot stiffened slightly. "I don't use *strength* to fly an aeroplane."

But Sir Arnold apparently did not hear him. Bent low over the model, he fussed with it, getting it straight, perfectly lined up with the polished path of the table. "The speed is 75 knots. You pull back on the stick—"

"I *ease* back on the stick."

Sir Arnold was busy tilting the model. "Up and up came the nose-wheel."

"Not so high as that!"

But the Queen's Counsel did not lower the nose of the model. "A pitch dark night. No horizon. No instrument guidance. And you still know exactly how high you held the nose up?"

"You get to know those things by experience."

"*Experience, Captain?*" Sir Arnold looked astonished. "This was only your second night jet take-off with passengers!"

"I have nineteen thousand, three hundred hours—"

"But what does that avail you, Captain, when your command time on the Phoenix is a scant thirty?"

A flush darkened the pilot's face. "From long experience, regardless of type, you get a sixth sense —"

"Please, Captain!" Sir Arnold held up his right hand—a buffer, a halt sign. "If you would allow me to proceed." He pushed the model forward, nose still held high. "The wing at this angle . . . as you can see . . . is exposed to immense drag, slowing the whole aircraft down——"

"That was not —"

"We know Mr. Lambourne was concerned ——"

"He wasn't!"

"And perhaps, he anticipated a fraction the airspeed indication of 118 knots."

"Certainly he did not!"

"Captain Gort hauled back on the stick——"

"I *eased* back."

But regardless, up went the model's nose, higher still.

"The Phoenix did not fly. The obvious reflex action was to haul back harder —"

"You're wrong!"

"Till the aircraft assumed such a nose-high attitude that it *could not* achieve flying speed!"

"I never got the nose so high!" Hunched on his seat, hugging his fury to himself, Gort seemed to have gone smaller, his arms still across his body, his fists clenched. "I told you . . . I couldn't get response from the controls!"

"In a situation like that . . . all over in a second or two . . . you can't really remember what you did, can you?"

"I can. Yes, I can."

"And when you hauled back on the stick, Captain Gort, I don't think you quite knew your own strength —"

He had forgotten the heat, the watching eyes, the park, the sunshine—everything except this tiny ghost of Victor Fox on the

prink of the table: nose held high, accusing, vaunting its shiny, undamaged perfection. Suddenly, goaded beyond control by this layman demonstration, his arms broke free of their tight hold on each other. His right hand slid across the polished surface, gripped the mid-fuselage, pressed the nose downwards. "Look, I'll show you!"

"Captain Gort, *if you please* —"

"Here!" He was about to push the little model backwards. "This is what happened."

"Captain Gort, let go of it!"

"You're giving the wrong idea . . . the wrong picture!"

Fingers—red ones and white ones were intertwined now, wriggling with each other on the fuselage. The wings started vibrating. The little tail shook.

"It was like this——"

"I've told you!" Sir Arnold's voice had gone harsher: one note higher: almost shrill. "Let go!"

The nose-wheel came down into line with the main wheels, skidded on the bevelled edge of the table. The port wing lurched, thudded against the wood. Whipping round to the left, the model slipped from under Sir Arnold's clutching fingers, momentarily became airborne and then, dropping, switched over on its back, fell further tail first till the rear of the fuselage hit: cracked: broke: split wide open: spilled out on the ground a debris of wood splinters and manikin passengers. The severed left wing and half a jet engine slid under the table. Unharméd, the right wing, still rocking to and fro, tapped the floor twice—then upside down, lay still.

"Captain Gort! Look what you've done!"

In all the heat and sunshine, this moment froze.

The thin stiff finger of the Queen's Counsel, pointing: the craning heads of the Commissioner and his assessors: the press staring: girl-clerks and stenographers watching: people at the back getting up for a look at the scattered bits of the little wreckage. A sigh went through the crowd in court, as though a sign had been shown them: as though some divinity, worried by witches, impatient with the dawdling of human procedure, had flung out this startling signal to chill them. Civilised out of all

such dark judgments, still sharply they drew in their breath; held it: waited.

"You told me to let go!"

But the Queen's Counsel took no notice. He said nothing. He was on his knees, carefully picking up the fragments one by one.

The court watched.

Sir Arnold had collected them all. In silence, he carried them to the table. There, crouched over his pieces, he fiddled with the broken fuselage, trying to fit the jagged edges of the wood together, weld it smooth and whole and well.

"Sir Arnold."

He did not look up. "Sir?"

"Will you proceed?"

He put all his pieces down immediately. He straightened. He started walking away from the table—retreating, it seemed—his head turned away, holding his hands. He left Gort sitting there, high-lighted now in self-conscious isolation, foolishly looking at the broken model uncertain what to do in this judicial environment, turning his head to the left and the right.

"I am obliged, Sir." Sir Arnold stood right under the dais now, far away from the table. He had taken out his handkerchief again. He was mopping his face. "Under the circumstances . . ."

"You have completed your cross-examination?"

Sir Arnold bowed his head. "You are correct, Sir. As far as Captain Gort is concerned, I have, with respect . . . finished."

The Commissioner conferred with his assessors. Then, holding up a paper, rather sharply: "You still wish to examine witnesses in the order here given?"

"With your permission . . . I do so wish."

The Commissioner hesitated. A barrister himself, with no aeronautical knowledge, he whispered to the flying expert on his left, before clearing his throat to say: "After so long, Captain Gort will be tired . . . will doubtless welcome a rest before examination by other counsel later." He nodded sympathetically at the figure still sitting by the table. "Thank you, Captain."



Everybody's eyes watched the pilot rise, make a small half bow, walk—still red-faced, but with a certain slow, heavy dignity—to a seat at the back of the court.

"Captain Dallas!"

Light footsteps sounded on the six stairs from the top tier to the floor of the court. This man was lean: a rather thin face under brushed-back brown hair. He walked across the polished wood with complete unself-consciousness, his head held high, his feet quick and quiet on their rubber-soled suede shoes. He gave a careless hitch to the trousers of his grey light-weight suit before sitting down on the empty chair by the table, his knees wide open, his shoulders leaning back. Comfortable, with a quite-at-ease self-confidence, he first studied the wreckage of the model, then studied Sir Arnold Hobbes.

His expression did not change, even after he was sworn. It would be difficult, in any case, to imagine the expression on that face ever making a substantial alteration. The forehead was quite unwrinkled. The face, with its high cheekbones, its full red lips and fresh complexion was well enough made: attractive, reasonably good-looking: but it was a young face, quite certain of the black and white of everything it looked out on. Thirty-five years of life had not succeeded in making a mark on it. Two cool, rather quizzical hazel eyes dared life to try.

"Now, Captain Dallas . . . you were one of the first Airways pilots seconded to the Atlas Aviation Company for training on the Phoenix?"

"Yes."

"The other was Captain Judd . . . now the Phoenix Fleet Flight Captain?"

"Yes."

"Your relations with Atlas Aviation have always been good?"

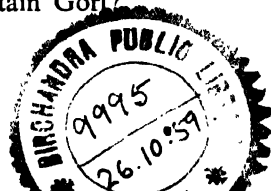
"Very friendly."

"You are now the Training Captain?"

"Yes."

"You supervised the instruction of the first airline pilots on the Phoenix . . . one of whom was Captain Gort?"

"Yes."



"Captain Gort has a very long standing in British civil aviation, has he not?"

"Yes."

"Did you know he had insisted on being posted to the Phoenix Fleet?"

"I knew he was keen."

"Did you know that Empire Airways were also . . . it is your word . . . keen that he should remain on the conventional piston-engined aircraft that he had so successfully flown for so many years?"

"Yes, I did know."

"And perhaps you were also . . . well, I suppose we can still use the same word . . . *keen* that Captain Gort should remain on piston-engined aircraft?"

"I did say that it might be more sensible if the younger captains were trained first."

"More *sensible*?"

"That is . . . more economical. An instruction course is expensive. If a man will be retiring —"

"Yes, yes." Sir Arnold shrugged away expense as irrelevant with an angular movement of his shoulders. "But is it not also true to say that the technique of flying jets is completely different from conventional aircraft?"

"I wouldn't say that . . . no. But they take some getting used to."

"And the thirtys to fortys would get used to them quicker than a man of Captain Gort's age . . . a man of fifty-one?"

"It depends on the man."

"Well . . . let's look at some facts and figures." Sir Arnold's long fingers extracted from among his papers a typewritten memorandum. "Now the average flying instruction time on that first Phoenix course was fifteen hours. Captain Gort took twenty-one."

"Some people learn more slowly."

"And here we have also your Check report on Captain Gort before he went out on the Route. It isn't as good as most of the others I have seen, is it?"

"It was satisfactory."

. "Your assessment of him was *an average pilot*."

The expression on Dallas' face had not altered throughout the questioning. No hesitation: no surprise: no concern: no partiality whatever. His whole attitude implied that he had nothing to hide, that in this probing into the cold remains of a tragedy, no blame could ever be fixed on him. He had given evidence with certainty. Now a certain wariness crept into his eyes. He paused, as though he was choosing his words carefully. "It is only fair to emphasise the very high standard we set. When I had finished his instruction, I was convinced that he was a competent pilot on the type."

"Captain Dallas . . . of course! *Of course!*" Sir Arnold walked over to the witness's side, so concerned he seemed to make his meaning clear. "We do not doubt that! No slight is intended on your instruction!"

The wariness vanished. Dallas' face resumed its state of unwrinkled unconcern. The Queen's Counsel returned to his own side of the table. In a matter-of-a-fact way, he said, "Just a few technical questions now, Captain." He fanned his face with his papers. "Now have you ever known the brakes to bind on the Phoenix . . . preventing the achievement of flying speed?"

"No."

"Have you ever known an engine to fail at a critical time on take-off?"

"No."

"Have you ever known any technical failure prevent a Phoenix becoming airborne?"

"No."

"Would you go so far as to say that the Atlas Aviation Phoenix was the most reliable aircraft you have flown?"

"Yes."

Sir Arnold paused. Putting his papers away, bare-handed now, he said, "Two more questions, Captain, and then we can release you. Tell me . . . that nose-high attitude - I regret I can't demonstrate it to you now . . ." He waved his hands ruefully at the broken pieces on the table. "But it *is* possible for a Phoenix to get into that position?"

"Yes . . . it's possible."

"And in such an attitude, if the runway was as long as from Land's End to John o' Groat's, the aircraft would still remain on the ground?"

"So long as nothing was done about the nose-high attitude, the Phoenix would not fly."

"Captain, pardon me---" Standing erect now, Sir Arnold's voice was higher. His words came thicker and faster. "Mr. Commissioner has not heard . . . the acoustics of this glass-house cannot be commended. Would you be so good as to repeat that last answer of yours?"

"So long as nothing was done about the nose-high attitude, the Phoenix would not fly."

But now it was Sir Arnold Hobbes who did not appear to have heard him. He was busy bending over the centre of the table, his fingers manipulating bits of broken model, a study in concentration as he tried to fit one piece here, another piece there, oblivious of the silent, watching court around him.

Then suddenly he lifted his head. He smiled. "Captain Dallas . . . thank you." His voice had slowed down to a dandy's drawl. "I . . . am . . . obliged."

2 "No! You can't go in!"  
The girl standing there so close on the other side seemed to be just waiting for the court-room door to open. In the second that he closed it softly behind him, Hugh Dallas' practised eyes had skimmed across her—noting, approving, criticising: the cool green dress with the turned-up collar; the notebook-and-pencil held closely at breast level; the ash-blond hair parted in the middle, tightly drawn into a bun at the back.

A newspaperwoman.

He thought to himself: what a wonderfully descriptive word that is, by God! The length of it, the thinness. He had watched several in the Press Box, busily scribbling every little thing down: elegant, not a hair out of place, neat as new pins and just about as sharp. He had spent a certain proportion of his time in

court that day, studying the species. There were no women in the small public gallery, and they were prettier than the stenographers.

"Has Captain Gort finished his evidence?"

She had rather a husky voice. He had expected it to be higher.

"Yes . . . but he's not been released."

"But why can't I go in? I thought ---"

"Commissioner's orders. Hobbes blew up after lunch, there was so much coming-and-going."

"Oh." Suddenly she seemed uncertain. The business-like poise vanished. She was turning away to walk alone down the long corridor, when he said, "Look---"

She stopped. The eyes that looked at him were, he saw that now, light green. In a streamlined kind of way, they tapered at the corners. He noticed the pink and white skin: the small neat face balanced so beautifully on a long slender neck: the bright mouth which (given half a chance) might well be passionate.

He smiled the particular smile that had always worked before. "Not to worry. We'll have a cup of tea together . . . and I'll tell you about it."

There was a curious look in the eyes now: wary? amused? challenging?

"I'm thirsty. That place"—he jerked his thumb backwards—"is as hot as hell."

He was not used to hesitation. Though she had said nothing, he assumed acquiescence. "The cafeteria's on the ground floor."

"Well---"

"Or must it be the Ritz?"

Whatever look there may have been in her eyes before, now it was amused. She relaxed a little. She even smiled back.

"Is the cafeteria that place with the glass doors, just near the main entrance?"

"That's right."

"Then the Ritz is no good. It *must* be the cafeteria."

She had started to walk beside him. With satisfaction, he listened to the clicking of her high heels on the wooden floor, interspersing the soft footfalls from his own rubber soles. Swing-

ing slightly at each step, the wide skirt made a crisp crackling noise against her silken legs.

"I don't usually go off to tea with strange men."

"Of course not."

"But I want to hear what happened today."

"Naturally."

They always tried this explanation business, the minute they'd allowed themselves to be picked up. Even these so-called sophisticated young women. They were all the same. What the whole lot wanted was someone to lean on, someone who knew where they were going, and then they wouldn't at all mind coming along to. *Anywhere* -cafeteria or the Ritz, the House of Lords or the Thames embankment, the destination was unimportant. A man had only to give the impression of boundless confidence and he could hardly go wrong.

They walked down the stairs side by side, rather self-consciously, bracing the heat, till they reached the ground floor.

The cafeteria was empty. Three flies lazily chased each other round the unlit lamps. The mock-marble counter was ringed with tea-stains. A bronze urn and a copper urn stood side by side, like the cylinders of some monstrous machinery. A girl in an off-white overall was scooping up sticky biscuits with a small metal shovel, too occupied to notice them come in.

Dallas made a wry face. "I didn't realize it would be as bad as this. Shall we go somewhere else?"

"No. This is all right." She led the way to a red-topped table opposite the door and sat down.

Still standing, he asked her, "Tea and cakes?"

She nodded. "That would be nice."

"Won't be, but still——" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The girl in the overall stopped scooping biscuits as he came up to the counter and said: "Yes?"

"Two teas. Two cakes."

She dived the same shovel into the glass cavern beside her, and scooping up two Fujiyama-shaped white-iced cakes, shook them on to one plate. She turned a lever on the bronze urn. It hissed. Steam rose. Brown fluid dripped first into one cup, then another. Then she shooed cups and plate away from her

across the mock-marble, and held out her hand. "One and sevenpence. Milk and sugar on the table."

The delivery of the tea and cakes took two journeys. The girl in the green dress watched him, saying nothing. When he finally sat beside her, he said, "Pretty awful, I'm afraid."

"Not too bad."

"Have one?"

"Thank you."

He watched the cool long fingers take a cake. "Sugar?"

"Thank you."

As they stirred their tea, he said, "You know, I shall always remember this first meeting of ours because of the"—he sent his hand waving expressively at the emptiness of all the tables and chairs around them—"glorious surroundings. Soft lights . . . sweet music . . . discreet waiters . . . champagne——"

"Tell me about the Inquiry."

There had been no need, surely, to get down to the brass tacks of business so immediately. Interrupted in his usual flow, for a moment he frowned. "Oh yes . . . the Inquiry." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, of course, it's going the way everyone expects it to go." He looked at his watch, and opening his eyes wide, made them sparkle with a kind of forced excitement: "We'll be having the floor show in a minute!"

"And what way's that?"

God, these newspaperwomen! The neat notebook, with the pencil through the hoop on its hinges, she'll be opening that in a minute, before she's half way through her cake.

"There is a small charge for inside information."

"Inside information?"

"*Inside* information." He had this way of repeating questions and turning them into definite statements—no question mark about them, in a voice that was now the brisk, efficient one that had uttered his evidence. "I'm the Empire Airways Training Captain."

"Oh, I see." The green eyes looked very slightly mocking. "An expert?"

"An expert."

"No false modesty, have you?"

"About flying . . . none. No sentimental illusions either."

She lifted her cup and drank very slowly, her eyes still studying his face. He was aware that this was not going to plan. She had seemed acquiescent enough—keen in fact, after the accustomed initial demur—to come his way. Now, for the moment, he had an unaccountable and unmistakable feeling of being brought along *her* way. He was not used to such a feeling. He leaned further over the table. He said, "I don't know what it is about you, but the moment I saw you standing there——"

"You must be the expert who gave Captain Gort his training on Phoenixes . . . Captain Dallas, isn't that your name?"

"Good girl!" He nodded his head approvingly. At least she'd got her facts right, and these days so few of them did. "Now this small charge is simply that you'll have dinner with me."

"All right, then."

"If you'll tell me your name and where you live, I can pick you up any night except——"

"It was sad about the First Officer."

"Lambourne? Yes . . . nice chap. Broke his neck. Bad luck. Thank God there weren't any more!"

"It must have needed great skill on Captain Gort's part."

"Well——" He gave her a small sideways knowledgeable smile, but she did not seem to notice it. In the same direct, unswerving way, she went on, "You were going to tell me why it crashed."

He drew back from the table, folding his arms. Somewhat irritated by this one-track singleness of mind through all the delectable distractions he was offering, he said, "Since you know the case so well, I'm surprised *you* don't tell *me*."

At least she was intelligent. He would not, hour after hour, have to put up with a long flight-plan of giggling, girlish inanities. She scented a story, a scoop. No wonder she was so obsessed.

"It was the aircraft, wasn't it? The aircraft? Didn't the engines——?"

The effect on the girl of one short shake of his head was surprisingly satisfactory. He smiled. Now, she seemed quite anxious, looking up at him with proper respect even in those



green eyes, waiting for the facts that she couldn't get elsewhere.

He drank the last of his tea with deliberate slowness. He took out a silver case. "Cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

"You don't mind if I——?"

"Not at all."

He took a cigarette out, tapped one end on the top of the case, turned it upside down, tapped the other end. "I don't need to warn you about the dangers of spreading information about the causes of an accident before the official results of an Inquiry are published."

"No . . . you needn't."

"But since you missed the most important part today . . . I'll give you the whole thing in a nutshell." He lit his cigarette and tossed the match into the ashtray. He inhaled, blew out the smoke, and as always when he talked about flying, just said with off-hand infallible conviction: "Pilot error."

"Oh, no!"

"I'm afraid so."

"You mean, Captain Gort——?"

"Captain Gort." He paused, and then, as an explanation, added lightly, "My prayers are said nightly for the safety of young girls and old pilots."

He saw that her eyes had gone rounder, not nearly so tapered. The pupils were bigger and blacker; around them, the rim of green had thinned. "You're wrong!" The words came out almost breathlessly. "I'm sure it wasn't pilot error!"

Nettled, he said, "Are you? Then what was it?"

"It was the Phoenix."

He leaned right back in his chair, and put his hands in his pockets. The back of his neck had gone slightly red. He said slowly, "You know . . . that was a *very* unwise remark!"

"What about your remark on pilot error?"

"I happen to know what I'm talking about."

The green eyes had returned to their pristine shape and coolness. "Do you?"

"I do."

"If it's so obvious . . . I wonder they bother to have an Inquiry."

"You should have been in court this afternoon . . . then you'd have wondered even more!" He was suddenly beyond controlling the irritation that he felt against the icy ignorance of this unknown newspaperwoman: stupid girl, talking about things she knew nothing about! He screwed up his cigarette in the ashtray. "It was painful to watch. Hobbes ran rings round poor Gort. Made him look an utter fool."

The look on the girl's face was still the same one of strange impregnable disbelief.

"Gort got himself into an excessively nose-high position before he'd reached flying speed . . . no question about it! That's why he didn't get off."

"I know it wasn't his fault."

"Look!" His favourite imperative - the signal to sit up and listen! He put his elbows on the table, held his face in his hands. "Victor Fox broke its back, sure . . . but they got all the pieces. There was no evidence of engine failure. They tested everything . . . *every little thing*! Nothing wrong with the aircraft anywhere!"

"Of course there was something wrong with the aircraft!"

At least now the ice had broken. He could see she was angry. For some reason, her hands were quivering.

Dallas could feel the sweat round his neck. He saw the broken yellow crumbs left over from the cakes, the black leaves half sunk in the muddy brown remains of tea in the cups. He felt hot, tired and vexed, but when he spoke, his voice was pumped full of sweet reasonableness: "Look . . . we've spent years building up the Phoenix to the finest jet airliner in the world. Millions of pounds, too. So you see——"

But she did not. In spite of his efforts, her fury seemed to have increased. "Having spent so much of your past on it . . . your future isn't by any chance bound up in the Phoenix, is it?"

More puzzled than angry, he said, "I don't know what it's got to do with you. I don't see why you should get so worked up in defence of Gort. I feel sorry for the old chap, but——"

"You needn't feel sorry for him. I don't."

"Then what on earth's all this,—"

"He's my father . . . that's why!" She had got up now, taken her notebook in her still trembling hands. "I'd have told you earlier if you hadn't been so busy, giving me all the answers!"

Embarrassed, lost for words, he jumped up, too—all anger dissolved. "Look . . . I'm terribly sorry! For some reason . . . the notebook, I think . . . I took you for a newspaper-woman."

"No shorthand in this book." She opened it, letting the pages slide by, one by one. He saw names and times. "Only appointments . . . and some longhand notes. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm just a doctor's secretary. I've just come from one of his conferences."

"Please don't get the idea —"

His words trailed away into a hot scowling silence around them. They stood facing each other, not moving. Over by the counter, the flies had flown down from the lamps to buzz against the glass food-cases. Uninterested in anything that might happen to be going on around her, the girl in the overalls turned over a page of her paper.

Through the glass door Dallas caught sight of Gort's burly figure passing in the corridor. The girl saw it, too. Without saying goodbye, just as though he wasn't there at all, she took her handbag off the table with her free hand, and started to walk away.

He followed her, trying to think of something to do or say. He was too late to open the door for her. She was gone before she could possibly have heard his explanation: "I mean . . . look . . . if I'd known——"

She called down the corridor at the square blue back. "Hey . . . what's all the hurry?"

By the time he had stopped and turned round, she was smiling. "Charlotte."

"I got off early. I thought we might go home together."

She could see he was in a black mood: the same signs she

knew so well—the thinned eyes, the tight lips, the way the flesh of his cheeks quivered when he spoke.

She came up and put her arm through his. “They wouldn’t let me in. So I was just having a cup of tea in the cafeteria when I saw you.”

They walked down the steps together.

“Wish I’d had a cup of tea.”

“Well, let’s go and have one.”

“No,” he said. “I want to get back home. We’ll have some tea at home.” He stood on the pavement, gesticulating to passing cabs. “These blasted taxis! Never here when you want one!”

As they waited, she said carefully: “How did it go?”

“Fine. Bit tired . . . that’s all.”

He left it at that. He seemed anxious not to enlarge. So she said. “Dr. Dawes was in fine form at the conference.”

“Good! These blasted taxis!”

One stopped at last. Gort opened the door for her, and then said to the driver, “No. 2, Quiggan Square.”

“Quiggan Square, guvnor?”

“Quiggan Square . . . yes, Quiggan Square! You’re not trying to tell me you don’t know where Quiggan Square is?”

Charlotte sat back on the seat, and closed her eyes, conscious of the heat, the sound of the traffic, the arguing between the cabby and her father.

Eventually, Gort climbed in, looking angrier than ever. “Fellow didn’t know where Quiggan Square was! Quiggan Square . . . in Mayfair! These blasted taxi-drivers!”

He sat in his own corner, wiping the sweat off his face with a handkerchief, as the taxi slid through the stifling streets.

His shoulders were hunched half way up his head. He kept his eyes away from her. The taxi swung along Piccadilly. He sat quite still, saying nothing. When she glanced at him sideways she saw the expression of his face alter from anger to a sad frustration. Once, soundlessly, his lips formed a few words. He lifted his hand, and dropped it to his side with a gesture almost of despair.

“I didn’t do it,” he said. “I didn’t break the thing.”

Assuming that he meant that same aircraft which had dominated their lives for the last few weeks, she was pierced with an agony of tenderness. Then, remembering Dallas' words, she took his hand and squeezed it hard. "Of course you didn't, father! I *know* you didn't!"

He seemed startled by her vehemence. He looked down with surprise at his own hand clasped so fiercely in hers.

"Don't be so silly, Charlotte," he said. "You weren't *there*!"

3 Quiggan Square was an isosceles triangle. Its only access to the outside world was a twisting alley of a road which connected it with the magnificent Palladian sweep of Cavanagh Crescent. On its two sides of equal length, the houses had been mews and servants' quarters for the mansions whose blackened backs towered so high above them. The small base side consisted of one red brick block of luxury flats, and it was on the top floor of these, running from the back to the front, with a view that included a small glimpse of Hyde Park through a chasm of stone, that the Gorts held the lease of flat 6—two bedrooms, a large lounge, a bathroom, a dining recess and an excellent kitchen at a rental of £650 a year.

Out of the window on his left, as he sat one evening, a fortnight after he had given his evidence at the Inquiry, beside his dressing table after a bath, fixing a clean white collar on to his shirt stud, George Gort could see the roundel of green grass surrounded by sharp iron railings, the two beds of dry geraniums, the copse of laurel bushes and the half dozen horse-chestnut trees that were the gardens of Quiggan Square. Each resident contributed a small annual sum for their upkeep, in return for which he received a key to the gate. They were used mostly by dogs, and mothers with prams. Though he had been here six years, ever since his wife died, George Gort had never been in them. Not that (though he was careful in all other ways) he grudged the upkeep money. As he looked out at the gardens now, the greenness soothed his eyes. He did not notice the dust. He liked their air of quiet

gentility. The cars parked beside the railings were for the most part large and new.

Flat 6, No. 2, Quiggan Square—in every way—was exactly what he wanted.

It was so very different from No. 18, Warrington St., Rochdale, where he had lived for the first fourteen years of his life. There, the view from the front bedroom looked out on a grey street with a communal pump at the end of it. Horses clacked across the cobbles, drawing drays of coal or rags. The two long lines of terraced houses scowled at each other across a road filled with shouting children: the girls playing hopscotch, the boys a kind of cricket. Life was controlled by hooters and sirens. Beyond the grey roofs, there were always the tall chimneys. There were always men, leaning against the wall, waiting. There was always a policeman on the corner.

"Father . . . are you ready?" From the lounge, Charlotte was calling him. "They'll be here in a minute."

He knotted a blue silk tie; put a clean handkerchief in the top pocket of his double-breasted grey suit; carefully ran two military hairbrushes over his head; stood up; looked at himself in the mirror; called out: "Coming!"

As he entered the room, she was standing over by an ornate ebony elephant (brought back from Karachi), her hand on the latch of the window as she turned and pushed it open.

"You look very nice, Charlotte."

She was wearing a black skirt; the ruffles of a white cocktail blouse frothed round her neck. He nodded approvingly, and then, rubbing his large hands together, looked round the lounge — its bizarre mixture of furniture and ornaments part of the perquisites of flying for thirty-one years to all parts of the world—with evident satisfaction.

"I must say," he said. "I've been looking forward to this evening. And I dare say the Manninghams have been looking forward to it, too. Stuck out there in the country! I was saying to Edward only the other day that as the Phoenix Fleet Superintendent he should live more centrally."

"I think Jean Manningham's quite happy where she is." Charlotte did not add how reluctant Mrs. Manningham had

sounded on the phone in accepting even this invitation to drinks after dinner in Quiggan Square. .

Gore walked over to the glittering chromium bar he had installed on the other side of the radiogram. "Nonsense, Charlotte! She likes coming here. Fond of her. Fond of Manningham, too." He rearranged the glasses in their graduated sizes, put a pair of tiny tongs on a little silver bucket, full of lumps of sweating ice. "We grew up in flying together, after all. Not much we don't know about each other." He fussed over the bottles, turning them round to inspect their labels. "You haven't put the brandy out!"

"I meant to tell you, I didn't get a bottle."

He turned round to face her, lines of worry springing to life on his forehead. "But I asked you specially!"

"I called at Whitman's, but they'd only got the cheap stuff. I knew you wouldn't want that."

"Why didn't you try somewhere else?"

"Dawes let me off late. I hadn't time."

"But he'll probably ask for it!" Now he came to think of it, that was exactly what a provincial governor of Kurindi *would* ask for. At present on leave, and staying with Mrs. Manningham, his wife's sister, Sir Charles Cruikshank would *expect* brandy. "Really, Charlotte——"

She was smiling. "Anyway he'll drink gin. They always *do* drink gin."

"No . . . you're wrong." He looked at his watch. "I'd go and get it myself, but now it's too late." He sighed, turned away from his bar, and started to go round the various carved cigarette boxes—lacquer, ivory, lapislazuli, mother-of-pearl, coconut wood—to see that they were all well stocked.

Watching him with affectionate amusement, Charlotte was struck by how methodical he was. He was going through all his pre-social rites as conscientiously as though he was doing the Check List of an aircraft before becoming airborne. Here he was now—fresh, immaculate, his hands busy with their duties—while half an hour ago, both in their working clothes, they had been eating a quick supper of sausage and tomato. But she knew enough about Warrington Street to understand the connection

between a scrap meal in the kitchen and every drink under the sun for Sir Charles in the lounge. The need for considerable surface polish on a limited income had been the way of life into which she had been born. "The rent is a lot. We *must* live up to the address"—how many times had her father told her that? So it was that above the electricity and gas meters there were graphs pinned to the wall: a straight black line of estimated consumption, and the squiggly barbed wire, red as a temperature chart, carefully filled in each week, of units and cubic feet actually used. If there was one side product of George Gort's aeronautical education, it was a profound belief in the efficiency, accuracy and infallibility of graphs.

Irritating sometimes—of course it was! When he was on a trip, she would forget to fill them in. There was almost pandemonium when the red line pierced through the black one. But whenever she felt the flashing of anger inside her against her father's tabernacle economies, she calmed it by the memory of the few stories he had let slip out of the dark oblivion of his shrouded childhood. She knew he was the eldest of five children: that his father was a cotton operative by trade, but a feckless will-o'-the-wisp by nature; that his mother had supported the family by consistent sacrifice and continuous hard work; that now, apart from himself, there remained of the family only one brother in New Zealand.

The bell suddenly let out its discreet warning buzz. Charlotte disappeared into the hall.

Gort straightened up, tucked the cuffs of his white shirt under the grey flannel arms of his coat. Alone now, he stood on the Tabriz hearthrug, waiting in his lounge, his right hand already half outstretched to welcome his guests.

He could hear movements and female voices in Charlotte's bedroom as hats and coats were removed. Then in through the open door came Captain Manningham, side by side with his brother-in-law.

Manningham was tall. Thin, too, especially in the neck, which normally he held bowed, so that his eyes, even when he was looking at anyone, were half hidden by his brows. The skin of his neck and cheeks was brilliant red and looked as though it had been



burnt—which once it had been. Fire, though it had not disfigured him, had stamped a perpetual hot look as the only expression on his face. Himself a Captain of the same seniority as Gort, though his father had paid the enormous expenses of his flying training, whereas Gort had risen from the hangar floor, they had flown side by side, until a flying boat under his command had hit a piece of driftwood, landing at night off Southampton: had heeled over; caught alight; sunk. It had been largely due to Manningham's efforts that there had been no loss of life. The crash was not his fault, and he had not been blamed—but he had not flown again. As a reward, apart from his burnt face—and bearing in mind that he was well connected, had been educated at Haileybury and Oxford, was shrewd, quick, capable and could write intelligible English—he had been promoted (a rare honour for a crashed pilot) to a managerial position. A shy man, awkward, he moved uncertainly; there hung over him a perpetual air of being just on the point of making up his mind. And yet, when it was made up, he would often act with courage and an obstinate determination.

Gort advanced boldly towards them, smiling, utterly at ease. "Edward!"

"Hello, George." Jerkily, Manningham turned his neck. "I don't think you've met . . . I'd like you to meet"—it was the half stutter of not knowing quite what to do, how to do it—"my brother-in-law."

The hand that had waited so long now connected. "I'm honoured, Sir Charles."

The provincial Governor of Kurindi was also burnt—but his face was brown, nut-brown, gloriously golden over his bald head, contrasting with the stubby white hairs around his ears. The tip of his nose hung over a postage-stamp square of military moustache, as though it dearly loved the smell of it. He was squat. No neck at all, his head burst out of his body like a round protuberance. His hand in Gort's felt limp and boneless.

"Very pleased."

Before the conversation could be continued, the two sisters had entered. Both were dressed in silk, but there all similarity ended. Where Mrs. Manningham, the younger sister in pale

dove grey, was plumpish, quiet, subdued, the brilliant black and red on the governor's lady seemed to advertise her aliveness. As introductions were again effected, her eyes glittered at Gort from each side of her sharp nose, but only for a moment. Even as he was talking to her, off they went, exploring the room, black as a rook's, curious, interested—"Such a *lovely* room! What *lovely* things!"

Gort fussed over seats, asked about draughts, cushions, open windows, and finally as Charlotte finished arranging little tables beside each guest—drinks.

The ladies would have Pimm's.

"Now Sir Charles! Whisky perhaps?"

"With your very kind permission . . . brandy."

Over the cork-hatted army of bottles the large hands waved regretfully. Gort seemed confused, caught red-handed in this crime of arrant inhospitability. "Sorry! *Very* sorry! But brandy is the one thing——" And yet, even as he spoke the words in almost abject apology, his eye caught Charlotte's (her father, she reflected, was such an odd mixture) with a look that was half triumphant, half amused.

"Well then, gin. Gin'll do. With your very kind permission . . . a gin and a tonic."

Charlotte did not trouble to conceal the smile on her face.

The needs of the guests were satisfied. Charlotte was included with the ladies and given Pimm's. Gort—a compliment perhaps to the choice of his guest-of-honour—also drank gin.

As always with such affairs in England, the ladies sat together like so many bright birds, drinks in hands, discussing shops, clothes, restaurants—while the men on their side of the room cautiously prodded their way forward to find a subject of conversation innocuous enough to offend none of them.

Gort had found it in *golf*, and now he was sticking to it. Man-ningham supported him. They had both played together many times on the links at Summerdale. He had an astounding story (which now he told his brother-in-law) of Gort's aptitude in learning the game. He had taken lessons from Bainton, a Scottish professional, to improve his driving. And certainly his drives had lengthened, but now he was topping the ball slightly so that it

spun. No harm in that, of course, so long as the length was there. But the odd thing was this: Bainton also topped the ball a little. After his instruction, Gort's driving was almost identical with Bainton's.

"Parrot fashion, you see," Gort said, but he said it with pride. He could see nothing wrong in successfully copying other people. That was how he had risen—that and hard work—from Warrington St. to Quiggan Square. "Doing what I'm told . . . well, you might say it's born and bred in me."

"Damn good thing! Only wish in Kurindi——"

Gort rose, held out his hand. "You're empty, Sir Charles!" He took the governor's glass, then attended to the ladies. The small interruption made not the slightest difference to the status quo.

"And you like your work at the doctor's, Miss Gort?"

"Very much, Lady Cruikshank."

"But it won't be for long, of course. You're engaged?"

Charlotte smiled and shook her head.

"I expect all your boy friends are pilots?"

"I'm afraid I hardly know any pilots."

"What! With such a distinguished pilot for a father!"

Lady Cruikshank's indefatigable nose pricked away at Charlotte's past, while her husband told stories of colonial administration. The two conversations proceeded amicably side by side, while the last of the day's sunshine streamed through the windows, high-lighting the silken sheen of the green Chinese carpet (brought back from Hong Kong), the Japanese lacquer screens, the Peruvian silverware on the windowsill, the llama skin from Santiago in front of the cedar bookcase (Bermuda), the Indian temple bell beside the brassware from Ceylon. Charlotte had laid the law down very firmly over the decoration of the other rooms in the place, but not here. "There's not a drawing-room like this in the whole of Mayfair," he was often saying. Charlotte believed him, but still left it as it was.

The ormolu clock (Paris) ticked harmlessly away on the marble mantelpiece: the two sets of voices remained muted, separated from each other. And then, when it seemed likely that what Charlotte had feared would not, after all, happen this

evening, that this small social occasion on which her father had insisted would ride its prescribed limits to home-going time without even a mention of the subject that had so dominated all her thoughts, suddenly Lady Cruikshank leaned forward in her armchair, and said with sympathy, "I expect you're so glad your father's not flying any more, my dear."

Charlotte said at once, "He's only doing this ground job temporarily, Lady Cruikshank."

"He is?" Surprise made her voice higher. "I rather got the idea from Edward ----"

Out of the male conversation, Manningham's words came jumping nervously over towards them: "I asked George if he'd mind helping me out with an accumulation of Voyage Reports, that's all . . . until the results of the Inquiry came out."

"But aren't they out? It was something to do with getting the nose too high, I thought you said—" And then, looking round, seeing her sister's downcast eyes, her brother-in-law's face now redder than ever, the stiffening of the girl beside her, and sensing that perhaps the wrong thing had been said, but quite equal to the situation, calmly Lady Cruikshank proceeded. "Or did I read it somewhere? Anyway, how these men ever get those machines into the air is a marvel to me!"

In the moment of silence that followed, the only other person who seemed to be at ease was Gort. He said, "It's not really difficult, Lady Cruikshank."

"It *looks* impossible! But then, you see," the governor's wife went on, despite a long meaningful stare from Manningham, knowing very well that to drop the subject now would merely high-light whatever indiscretion she might have made, "I can't *stand* flying. I can't tell you how worried I'd be if ever Charles became airborne. But fortunately, he can't *stand* flying either."

"My dear, with your very kind permission, may I—"

"The Colonial Office . . . would you believe it? . . . suggested we go back on a Phoenix! Good for British prestige . . . governor arrives by jet airliner instead of that awful river steamer . . . most undignified, my dear—no proper privacy . . . on that beastly Umfofo for three whole days. But I put my foot down! I *care* very much about Edward's airline *and* about Charles's prestige"—

she smiled charmingly at both of them—"but all the same, we go by steamer!"

Gort said, "You'd be perfectly safe in a Phoenix, Lady Cruikshank."

The black and red silk shoulders shivered. "I cannot understand why Edward doesn't ground the whole lot of them!"

The sickly smile on Manningham's face emphasised his discomfort even more than the fidgeting of his fingers. "I don't think you understand——" he began, but then he trailed away, leaving it to Gort to say: "You can't ground the Phoenix because of one unfortunate incident. Now and then, these things happen to the best of aircraft."

"Then perhaps you can tell me, Captain Gort . . . what exactly *did* happen?"

"Best not say anything you know nothing about, Emily," advised her husband. "Leave that to the experts."

"I'm not *saying* anything. I'm *asking* something." Her black eyes, now for once quite still, never left Gort's utterly unselfconscious face. She repeated the question, perhaps to prove her point. "What *did* happen?"

"You wouldn't understand if he told you, Emily."

"I think she would," Gort said. "It's perfectly simple. The outer engines faded . . . a one in a million chance, and that doesn't mean, mind, that they *failed* . . . just at the critical moment when I was lifting the aircraft off."

"Oh I see! I see! You put it so clearly, Captain Gort, I don't know why the papers are making all this fuss."

Mrs. Manningham said mildly, "I do think we should be getting back," and her husband, jerkier than ever, immediately thrust out his arm, looked at his watch, raised his eyebrows, formed a soundless O with his lips, smiled and stood up straight.

Politely, Gort rose too. But as though the subject was one that he could not allow to remain unfinished, he said, "You mustn't judge by what you read in the papers, Lady Cruikshank. They're just full of Sir Arnold Hobbes and his theatricals."

"He must have been *very* trying."

•Gort shrugged his shoulders. "Didn't worry me. Sir Arnold Hobbes doesn't decide on the findings."

"And when will the findings be published?"

"In about a week." Gort moved the glass in his hand from side to side, watching the gin do its best to maintain its own level. When he spoke again, he was emphasising each word, as though earnestly endeavouring to impress their importance on his hearers. "These Inquiries are very fair. One of the assessors, you see, is a well-known commercial pilot . . . Yardley, a quiet type. Hardly opened his mouth, but never missed a trick. Pilots are very loyal to each other, Lady Cruikshank. You see, in our job . . . we *have* to be."

Charlotte, Mrs. Manningham, Sir Charles—they were all on their feet now. Conscious at last that she was the only one sitting, Lady Cruikshank slowly rose from her chair, joined the tail-end procession of the party, now chatting perfectly normally about the heat, the glorious summer and moving towards the door.

Charlotte disappeared with the ladies. The three men stood in the hall, waiting.

Through the closed bedroom door floated Lady Cruikshank's voice, "I mean, after all . . . the wretched things are still flying . . . five services to Singapore a week, Edward tells me . . . and the way I see it, this fading of the engines may happen again——"

Unconcerned, apparently unhearing, Gort talked to Sir Charles about the advantages of living centrally. Manningham shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, rested his hand lightly on the door-knob.

Fresh, behatted, smelling of expensive perfume, newly lip-sticked, the ladies arrived, consumed the small hall: *goodbyes, thank-yous, how-very-nice-to-meet-yous* were exchanged in a chorus of male and female voices. And then, with his one and only brisk and decisive movement of the evening, Manningham had whisked his relations through the door, and had himself disappeared after them.

Back in the lounge, alone together again, Gort said, "I told you he'd ask for brandy!"

"I know. I'm sorry." She said it almost coaxingly, a smile ready to deepen, eyeing him anxiously, "But he did all right on the gin, didn't he?"

A slight quirk came on his mouth, but when he spoke his voice was a shade disapproving. "I thought Sir Charles was very nice. I thought they were both very nice."

On the far side of the room, Charlotte was collecting an ashtray from the sill. Leaning for a moment out of the open window, she looked towards the few lights shining through the stone canyon from Park Lane. She said slowly, "I liked *her*."

"Very natural, wasn't she? You wouldn't think she was a governor's wife." Gort paused for a moment. "But I must say Edward was sometimes like a cat on hot bricks."

"I didn't think he was any more nervous than usual."

"No . . . maybe not." Gort began tidying up the bottles on the bar. "Very fond of Edward, though. He means so well."

Still staring out of the window, as though talking only to the night outside, Charlotte said, "While we're on the subject of likes . . . d'you happen to like a captain called Dallas?"

"Dallas? Like Dallas? Why d'you want to know?"

"He rang me up this evening . . . before you got back from the airport. Asked me to go out with him."

"Didn't know you knew him, Charlotte."

"Well, I don't. Not really. We've met once . . . that's all. Some place or other." She shut the window. The bright Jamaican cotton curtain fell back, cutting off the night. She walked to the tables, collecting the empty glasses, and put them on the tray on top of the bar. "Anyway, it isn't important. I said no."

She was not as a rule communicative about her boy friends. Occasionally he answered the phone to one or other, opened the door, said *good evening* and then *good night*.

Once, months ago, he had come back a day early from a trip, and Charlotte had been having a small party. Nothing very special: gramophone records, beer, sandwiches. It had broken up shortly afterwards, without him exchanging more than half a dozen words with any of them.

He frowned. He couldn't quite fit Dallas into the picture. He had hardly thought of the man outside his job: a pleasant enough manner, good family (which counted), a bit of a reputation for

womanising, but then all the unmarried ones had. "Dallas is all right," he said, judiciously determined to be quite fair.

"Didn't he give evidence at the Inquiry which didn't exactly help you?"

Gort said slowly, "He only said what he'd got to say to defend himself. He didn't want his instructions blamed . . . that's natural."

The girl had her back to him. "I suppose so."

She sounded politely uninterested, tidying, putting the bottles carefully back in the cabinet, thinking anyway, the evening had been better than she'd expected. She began to feel even grateful to Lady Cruikshank for bringing up the subject of the Inquiry with such startling directness. Amazingly, her father had talked about it to strangers without embarrassment, even with confidence. She felt for the first time since the crash a lightening of her spirit, as though a heavy responsibility she had been shouldering had suddenly been eased.

For the past few weeks, she had watched her father carefully. Almost as meticulously as his household graphs, she had kept a mental record of his spirits, what little he said, how he said it, what he ate, if he enjoyed it, how he looked, the number of times he smiled. She nearly always knew when someone was going to bring up the subject of the crash, for her nerves seemed to extend like antennae into the room. And immediately they gave warning she would spring into the conversation, interrupting, laughing too loudly, drawing attention to herself, changing the subject. Thinking he wouldn't want to be alone—for she had worried that since her mother died he had few friends to talk to—she had tried to stay at home in the evenings, to keep him company. But he would just read the evening paper, sometimes a book, hardly say anything at all.

Once or twice he did seem on the point of telling her something important, confidential—he appeared to be choosing his words so carefully and with such difficulty—and she would look down terrified that she would hear him say *It was my fault, Charlotte*. But it was always some small criticism, a suggestion as he called it, about herself or the house-keeping (the extravagant buying of out-of-season fruits, a bottle of milk had gone sour) and she



would say *Yes, father* or *No, father*, and he would seem surprised how meekly she agreed.

Lifting the tray up, she looked at her father, standing on his Fabriz rug, unmistakably British in all his pan-world welter of objects around him—relaxed, unmoved, confident. She felt sorry now that in her aviation ignorance Dallas' remarks about pilot error had assumed during the last two weeks such a frightening significance in her mind. She should never had listened to the man. Deriving strength from his strength, she said, "I'm glad you're not worrying about the results of the Inquiry, father."

"The results? Why should I, Charlotte? I did my damnedst to get it off. Nobody could have done any better."

"Good." She felt relieved, pleased. Quite cheerfully, she walked to the door. "I'll just wash these glasses up, and then I'm off to bed. Good night, father."

"Good night, Charlotte."

"You'll go to bed, too, won't you?"

"Yes . . . of course."

"You'll go to bed *now*? It's past eleven."

"I just want to finish that book you brought me."

"But you finished it yesterday!"

He said nothing for a moment. Then shook his head, smiled. "Oh yes . . . so I did!"

She stood in the open doorway the tray in her hands, scanning his face with concern. "Father . . . you're sleeping all right, aren't you?"

"Oh yes . . . yes. No trouble about sleeping. It's just——" He suddenly looked away from her. "It's Lambourne, Charlotte. Odd thing, but I dream about him. Not in the crash, or anything like that. Just his face, that's all." He hesitated. "I think . . . I think . . . Charlotte, I think I'll stay up a little bit longer, anyway."

4 Nineteen miles south-west of Quiggan Square, in the shabby suburb of Hunnington, and fifteen miles due south of the gigantic London Airport was the small factory airfield belonging to Atlas Aviation. It, too, had runways and hangars, a control tower, a restaurant, flower-beds, bushes and lawns—but on a much more modest scale, and instead of luxurious passenger facilities there were line upon line of engine shops and assembly blocks: a power house: a blast furnace: and the glass-sided banks of draughtsmen's halls.

Here, four years ago, the Phoenix had been conceived. Here, most of its eight hundred and forty thousand pieces were manufactured. Here the British Empire Airways pilots were trained to fly it. From this nest, four Phoenixes had already flown away for good to inaugurate the Super-Service to Singapore, and three of them were still operating it.

Not only was the Phoenix built here. Here every part of it was tested, and tested again. On a slight eminence, a barrel-shaped building housed a wind tunnel: weird noises could sometimes be heard there, as artificial hurricanes howled over the models of wings and fuselages, the airflow watched carefully to discover the best shapes for speed and lift. In a huge tank, near the main entrance, could just be seen the nose of a whole Phoenix fuselage undergoing the perpetual torture of immense water pressures. Nearby, in a little hut, a Phoenix window had suffered ten pounds on each square inch for three years so that men could breathe at 50,000 feet, and was still unmarked, uncracked. Enclosed in scaffolding, huge girders were dropped from all heights on to a Phoenix to prove its strength. In a test bed, a Phoenix jet engine had been roaring day and night at full power for the last three weeks, without once—to the annoyance of the neighbourhood—faltering.

It was still roaring away at the moment. Every other test, too, was still continuing on the orders of the man who had started it all. As with most other things to do with the Phoenix, those orders came from an office on the first floor of a red-brick administration

building with *Nigel Pickering, Chief Designer* on its glass door. It was a small room, almost panelled with photographs of aircraft, containing a large desk—rather untidy at present, piled high with drawings, letters, reports, the duralumin and bronze bits of a fuel filter. There was a round oil stain on the blotting paper.

But the chair behind the desk was empty.

Not that Pickering was away from his work. He was flying in it. Eight miles above that empty chair, standing alone in the passenger cabin, right in the tail of Phoenix Victor Kilo, the designer stared down at the whole of Southern England in the sunshine: nothing but a small simple map from that height, with London just a big black blob and the coastline scalloped away from the sea in white.

There was nothing in the stooping stance of the nondescript-looking man by the last starboard porthole to hint at the fierce pride which consumed him. A cigarette was now stuck on his lower lip, moving up and down as he breathed. An inch-long ash fell from it, exploded on his coat. He did not bother to brush it away. Gently under his feet, he felt the floor of the cabin tilt. Up front—the only other two occupants in the aircraft—Dallas would be showing his newest pupil, an Australian called Captain Braddock, steep-climbing turns.

Pickering felt the G urge as a pleasant shiver through his body. He closed his eyes. He smiled—experiencing once again this never-failing ecstasy of Phoenix flight.

The pressure on his spine relaxed. The aircraft had straightened up again. Dallas had demonstrated turns, stalls, two-engined flying. This would probably be a practise emergency descent after high altitude pressurisation failure. He opened his eyes, and saw the air-brakes come down like silver gates under the wing. Instinctively he braced himself against the seat in front of him. Next moment, the nose went steeply down. The Phoenix screamed earthwards.

Four minutes later, seven miles lower, the aircraft pulled out. Level now, the ground was closer. Pickering could see trees, houses, cars—even people—as the Phoenix swept by. He watched its shadow race over the fields, and thought to himself: *even that*

*dark shape is beautiful. That must have been how it first flew into my mind.*

Humbly—for sometimes he was very humble—his head sank almost on to his chest, as he remembered that night, four years ago now. He had sat down straight away to make a now historic drawing: the sharp nose, the engines and their mountings, the smooth streamlined fuselage, the triple tailplane, and the glorious symmetrical triangle of the swept-back wings.

Through days of discouragement that would have brought a lesser man to despair, that drawing had kept him going because he believed in it utterly. Though it was only the second aircraft design for which he had been fully responsible, as a poet believes in his poem, a musician in his symphony, a painter in his picture, he believed in it as his own particular vision of beauty, and was therefore compelled to communicate it.

But Nigel Pickering had done more than that. Because he was also a mathematician and a scientist, he had *proved* it. He had translated his vision of beauty into calculated truth. Even more than that, he had crystallised that soaring urge in man—the ache to lift himself up through succeeding aeons of evolution, up through civilisations, on and then further on—into this magnificent mechanical conception of speed. And he had built it not for money, nor for power, nor oddly for prestige—although on occasion, prima-donna like, he could be ferociously proud and possessive of it—but because he felt in the Phoenix a fragmentary brushing of his being with vast eternal concepts.

He was suddenly conscious of the sound of a door opening. A voice was calling out: “Nigel . . . Nigel, where are you?”

He moved away from the porthole. He stubbed out his cigarette in a seat-arm ashtray. He put his head round the pillar containing the ship’s library and drinking fountain. Now he could see the whole length of the cabin, and as always he was struck with the cream-and-blue loneliness of it when it was empty, the almost weird effect of row after row of comfortable leaned-back vacant seats.

“Oh, there you are!” Dallas was standing in the open door to the flight deck. “We’re going in now . . . if you’ve finished.”

“Yes . . . I’ve finished.” All he had been doing was to check

the flow of refrigerated pressurised air to the cabin, and he had found it perfectly satisfactory. Ever since training had started at Hunnington—aircraft were so scarce it had to be done in between factory acceptance tests—he had used any excuse to get airborne.

"Well then, we'll land. Coming up front . . . are you?"

"Yes . . . yes. I'll come up front now."

Pickering walked forward up the long grey carpet. Dallas was waiting for him, still holding the door open. "Everything all right down your end?"

"Fine." The designer had met Dallas six months ago now, when he had first come to the factory to learn to fly the Phoenix from the Atlas test pilots. Apart from Judd, the Flight Captain, who had been seconded for development work, he knew him better than any other Empire Airways pilot. "And your end?"

"Fine."

The two of them walked together past the galley and the rest compartment to the flight deck. Braddock—a black-haired burly study in concentration—was flying from the right-hand seat.

Dallas slipped into the captain's position. The designer sat behind in the navigator's seat. He did not say anything. As always in the cockpit, he kept himself unobtrusive. He took a great delight in watching pilots fly the Phoenix, feeling their pleasure in its sweet gracefulness even more keenly than they did.

Now he watched the Training Captain doing a circuit of the airfield at 1500 feet. It was always best to watch a born pilot: a man who flowed into the machine, giving it brains and direction, and taking in return a god-sized power. Dallas' hand moved with such unhurried deliberation, now doing the *Before Landing Check*: lowering the undercarriage lever, gently winding backwards on the wheel of the elevator trim.

They were so sure of themselves. So much in harmony with the Phoenix.

The sibilant sound of the jets died down. Steadily, the aircraft descended; swept over the hedge; softly touched down a hundred yards beyond the threshold; slowly slowed; taxied up to the open hangar.

There, Dallas shut down all four jets. In the silence that followed, his voice sounded higher than usual, as he said to the

Australian: "Next time I manage to get hold of an aircraft . . . we'll do circuits and landings."

Then all three men climbed out of the aircraft, down the steps to the tarmac that glistened with oil and kerosene stains. But they did not walk away from it.

As though the silver shape behind them was a magnet for their minds, they all turned back to look at it.

Braddock pushed his uniform cap a little further back on his head and observed in a marked Australian accent: "That's what I call an aeroplane!"

"Enjoyed yourself . . . did you?" the designer asked. He had lit another cigarette, and was now standing a few feet apart from the others, his hands in his pockets, swaying a little on his heels.

"I'm sold."

"Flies right," Dallas observed.

"Flies beaut. But it was the height got me. Gives you a kind of cut-off feeling, doesn't it?"

Dallas nodded. "Does a bit . . . yes."

"First time Birdman Braddock"—the Australian had a loud, unselfconscious hoarse laugh—"ever felt like a real Spaceman!"

The designer was smiling. His eyes were screwed up against the smoke as the cigarette, again pendulous on his lower lip, conducted this admiring conversation between the two pilots.

He still said nothing.

Then he felt in his breast pocket. He produced the sketch—precious now, it was in a special little leather case. He flourished it. "I thought that might interest you, Captain Braddock," he said, passing it over. "That's how I first saw the Phoenix."

The Australian bent his head, studying the drawing intently, comparing it with the aircraft in front of them. "Twins, eh?"

The designer's eyes shone. "Very alike . . . certainly. Especially the wing. You'll notice the wing——"

Braddock looked up at that great triangular sweep-back just above his head. "Always thought wings were such a headache these days?"

"We were lucky."

"Speed range is what . . . a hundred to six hundred miles an hour?"

"About that, yes."

"Aerofoil equally efficient, is it . . . right the way through the range?"

"Pretty well."

"Good looking, too."

They were getting on well together. They chatted, while Dallas listened. Their individual enthusiasms seemed so much to coincide.

And then suddenly, the Australian said, "But there's one thing——"

"What's that, Captain?"

"This lift business." Braddock was pointing to the widest part of the wing, where it was bisected by the fuselage. "Obviously, lots of lift there, but"—the finger's direction began moving down the leading edge—"it's getting less and less"—now it was indicating the sharp end, the acute angle—"till at the wing-tip it must be practically zero. At high speeds . . . fine, but surely at low——"

It was then that the designer's eyes moved from the fingers to the hands holding his precious drawing. The same sort of hands he had seen on several training flights, then again at the Inquiry into Victor Fox. Following a tactful code of conduct—especially while the official cause was still not published—that accident was rarely mentioned between the personnel of Atlas and Empire Airways. But it had had a profound and bitter effect on Pickering.

And now to be once more faced with similar hands to those that had caused all the trouble sent the blood up to his face. They were so much alike: large, like his had been: rough: clumsy looking: rather red: the knuckles big and bony, protruding from a fleshy fist. They were Gort's hands exactly.

A cold fear for the future struck at his heart.

"That's all checked," he snapped out. "And re-checked a hundred times!"

"How?"

That uninformed, pseudo-knowledgeable, irritating single syllable! He mimicked it, "*How?*"

It was always the same when he had to deal with laymen in his own field, who pretended to knowledge. Here was man talking

aerodynamical platitudes as though he was an aviation Socrates! A great bursting wave of impotent rage came up his throat instead of communication: for how could he communicate? This man couldn't speak the language of figures and formulae, of graphs and designs. He would have the typical pilot's knowledge of what he was flying, which was normally—Pickering had often been struck by the irony of it—infinitesimal.

He thrust out his own hand and whipped the drawing away, putting it safely back into its little leather case. "How?" he repeated, his cigarette at the *crescendo*. "What d'you think we've got a wind tunnel for?"

Without another word, he began to stump off alone, his head lowered, his hands still in his pockets, over the tarmac in the direction of his office.

"Hey," said the Australian to Dallas in astonishment. "What's gotten into him?"

In Manningham's office at London Airport, time was chimed by flowers. Snowdrops in January, crocuses in February, daffodils in March. April was brilliant with tulips. Then came Canterbury Bells, Sweet William, roses, asters, dahlias—the year sped colourfully onwards. Even in mid-winter, there were hot-house blooms: sometimes orchids. He cut them twice a week from his large garden, before the long drive from the Surrey village where he lived. Strange in a man that he should take the trouble! The office was really quite nice without them: utilitarian certainly, half-panelled in cedarwood, then sky-blue painted. Those flowers, Hugh Dallas thought, as he sat on the edge of the desk, watching Manningham's thin figure over by the window, they strike a wrong note here. One of those modernistic sculptures—all steel and string—would have looked better. What's he got over there now? What's he arranging in those two vases on the window-sill?

Pinks.

Manningham had fixed the last flower. He was leaning out of the open window staring at the huge departure Ramp below.

Down there, all clustered together, most of the world's



air-lines were represented. A Pan American D.C. 7 was just moving off the chocks, bound for Istanbul. A British Overseas Airways luxury Britannia was filling up for a non-stop North Atlantic crossing to New York. A Lufthansa aircraft was about to leave for Frankfurt. In the battle for world air markets, the large private enterprise firm of British Empire Airways had to contend with the spick and span efficiency of many competitors. But Dallas was aware that other airlines' aircraft were not for the moment interesting Manningham. He knew what was fixing the Fleet Superintendent's attention so rigidly before he heard the tin voice of the Tannoy announce: *Passengers are now boarding the Phoenix Flight 518, Super-Express to Singapore.*

"Dead on schedule again," Dallas said. "Who's taking it?" "Judd."

The pilot eased himself off the desk, and joined Manningham by the window. He saw under that great glass galleon of a Control Tower, all the silent aircraft waiting, the silver and white shapes of the long fuselages, the variety of tails, wings, snub noses, sharp noses, their leading edges all crossed with propellers except for the Phoenix, which stood in the centre, the cynosure of all those eyes of controllers, engineers, loaders, policemen, typists in offices, people in the public enclosure—unique, brand-new, the biggest and the prettiest. Dallas watched the back view of a Traffic girl, at the head of a long crocodile of varicoloured passengers, walking very straight with her dark-haired head up, wiggling a little with pride as she led them to the shining steps under the aircraft's open door.

"Going out to make arrangements for the extension of the Route to Sydney . . . is he?"

"That's right. Creighton's bringing the Service back from Singapore."

"Looks like a full load."

The Superintendent nodded. "Full loads everywhere these days . . . except at Ranjibad."

He paused for a moment. Then he said: "There's Judd now."

A long black shadow slanting over the grey tarmac and attached to it, seemingly part of it—like the inkblot butterflies made from

bending over the paper and smudging—a blue back, large square shoulders, under the hat only part of the head visible, and that incongruously fair. A brief-case in the left hand. The walk quick and precise. The Company Station Commandant, in his best uniform, wearing his gloves, pursued rather than accompanied him.

As the figure approached the aircraft, the ground-crew were lined up. Even the Traffic girl, perched on her high heels, stood stiffly to attention. The Flight Captain seemed to be inspecting them all. He stopped; called something out; beckoned to one of the men; shouted something; pointed; while the others, straighter than ever, watched and waited.

“Judd on the job.” A small, rather weary smile came over Manningham’s lips—fleeting, the sort of smile that nobody sees.

The man was dismissed. He returned to his place. Judd continued to the steps, where a waiting Operations Officer saluted. Laconically, Judd saluted back.

He climbed. The door slammed behind him. The steps were wheeled away. Within a minute, a whining started. Great puffs of grey-blue smoke blew out of the engines, as the jets were lit up, one after the other.

On the stroke of ten, the chocks were pulled away. The noise increased. It surged up and down. It wailed higher—and then higher still, as the Phoenix moved forward, weaving round a parked Stratocruiser, nosing its way in front of a taxi-ing Constellation. A Viscount stopped to let it pass. So did a D.C. 4. It was as though, in this aviation hierarchy, protocol was just as strict. There was an order of precedence, even among aircraft: and the Phoenix must come first.

Watched now by more than a thousand people, swaggering that triple tail, running up and down the full octave of all that power, the airliner wheeled to the left on to the taxi-track, and raced—easily first—for the end of the runway.

Turning from the window, Dallas walked away, to sit this time in the plain oak chair in front of the Superintendent’s desk. But Manningham still stood where he was, staring out.

A whine that grew louder and louder developed into a thin high-pitched shriek, drowning all other noises around it.

"Judd taking off," Manningham said. And then: "You know, *he* gets the nose up pretty high."

"Does he?" Dallas stayed where he was, not interested, preoccupied enough with his own training problems to take much notice. "You can't tell from this angle." He stared at the papers piling high in the In tray. "Judd knows how to fly a Phoenix."

Manningham came slowly back from the window to sit in his official chair behind the desk. There was a moment's pause while they both seemed to listen to the whine fade softly away into silence. Then Dallas leaned forward, one eyebrow slightly raised and said, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"I don't imagine," the pilot said—he had a way, Manningham had noticed of biting off his words, punctuating them with a mocking clench-toothed half-smile—"that you got me in here to admire Judd take-off?"

"No." Manningham flickered his eyes momentarily upwards at Dallas, and then lowered them again on to a white quarto-sized document just to the left of him: impressive: stamped with the lion and the unicorn, and the two mottoes, *Dieu Et Mon Droit* and *Honi soit qui mal y pense*: headed in big black letters *Report on Accident to Aircraft G-AKVF: price one and threepence*.

Catching sight of it, Dallas' eyes narrowed, his face assumed a curious flat blankness.

Without looking up, Manningham sent the report sliding across the desk. "It's about this."

"I guessed as much."

"Read it?" Manningham said, when the younger man made no attempt to pick it up.

"Yep. Read it yesterday."

There was a frozen stiffness now about Dallas' mouth. Seeing it, Manningham sighed. This man had done all the thinking on the accident that he was going to do. The subject was closed. Just like all the younger pilots. Always ready to blame one of their number. He knew. God, how he knew! Nevertheless, he said quietly, "What do you think of it, Hugh?"

Occasionally, rarely enough it was true, he had surprised a

sudden streak of sweet reasonableness in Dallas. Determinedly, he probed for it now.

"There wasn't much thinking to do on it, was there?" • Dallas felt in his pocket for his cigarette-case. As he held it open towards Manningham, his light steady eyes were fixed on the Fleet Superintendent's face. When he shook his head, Dallas took a cigarette himself. He tapped it on the case. "I read it. I studied it. I studied it with great care." The irritated tapping punctuated the three sentences. "And I wondered"—Manningham was suddenly struck by the controlled anger of the softly spoken words—"how to make bloody sure it never . . . *never* happens again!"

Perhaps something of Manningham's dismay communicated itself. After lighting his cigarette slowly, breathing in deeply, breaking the matchstick in his long brown fingers, more gently Dallas went on: "After all, it was what we expected, wasn't it?"

He studied the end of his cigarette as though at ease. He's not liking this much, Manningham thought. He's trying to make it easier for me now. He thinks I remember mine. And he's right. But it's far more than that.

"As far as I can see . . . it couldn't be the Phoenix. Pilot error . . . just as they say. Nothing else."

Not the Phoenix. There they went! All Judd's bright boys. Devoted to the aircraft, glorying in their own young bodies that enabled them to partner it. Get higher, get faster, on and on, up and up. Perhaps he, Manningham, was curiously pedestrian. But he had lost his illusions a long time ago. He had no ambition beyond this job, though he tried (probably unsuccessfully) to conceal that secret from his superiors. When he had been installed, rather unexpectedly, as Superintendent of the jets, the new President had made it plain to him that he had been chosen because (he had taken it as a compliment at the time) "he had his two feet firmly on the ground". A dependable, level-headed anchor, an earth to such electrical enthusiasm. Otherwise (and here the President's eyes glistened with pride) "Judd and his brilliant boys might get" (and here the President's hands went up in the air to demonstrate) "carried away." Manningham had his wife, his house, his garden, his car, quite enough

money. And since his crash, a desire—perhaps as strong as these young men's ambitions—to harm as few of his fellow-men as possible. To do nothing that afterwards he would find hard to house within himself.

In the uneasy silence, Dallas said calmly, "But it's tough on Gort." He tapped the report with his forefinger. "Having to live with *that*."

"*Very* tough."

Dallas' eyes narrowed again. He assumed the sudden air he sometimes did of watchful stillness. "What," he said, without shifting his glance from Manningham's face, "is going to happen to him?"

"That's just the question"—Manningham stroked his chin—"I asked the Director of Operations. The President is leaving it to me to do 'the wise thing'."

"Why?"

Manningham gave a wry smile. "I suppose he *might* have thought I was best qualified to judge."

Dallas shot the Fleet Superintendent an unexpectedly sympathetic glance. "He does that sort of thing quite often, doesn't he?"

"He does. Part of what he calls his 'decentralisation policy'. But Hugh"—seeing the sympathy, he wanted to reach it before it disappeared—"I wanted you —"

But it was too late. As quickly as it came, already it had vanished. Coldly, Dallas said, "I'm beginning to guess why you want me."

"Well . . . what about it?"

"*Guess*, I said. I'm hoping I'm wrong."

Manningham sucked in his thin cheeks. Then more heavily and deliberately than he had intended, he said, "No, I don't think you are. I think you've read my mind. I asked you to come in because, after a great deal of consideration"—Dallas was sitting there quite still, staring at him like a dog pointing—"I feel we should retain Captain Gort on the Phoenix Fleet. Fairest to him. Best for everyone." And smiling a little now, "Subject of course to a satisfactory Check."

There was a long pause. Then the very softness with which

Dallas said the words made them the more impressive. "Then you're making a mistake. A *hell* of a mistake!"

Manningham flushed.

In a sudden fury, Dallas ground out his cigarette and got up. Manningham could see all at once the prominence of the young veins in his neck, the way his upper lip became ruler-straight. The pilot walked over to the window. He stood there with his legs apart, hands in his pockets, jingling his coins. "After a crash like that?" He smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "*God!*"

"If Lambourne had been properly braced . . . he wouldn't have been killed."

"There wouldn't have been an accident, if Gort hadn't——"

"And if there had been no fatality, there wouldn't have been a public Inquiry. There would have been no publicity. Everything could have been done quietly."

"But there *was* a fatality."

"That doesn't make Gort's mistake the greater."

"*I* think it does."

Manningham lowered his eyes, remembering his sister-in-law's remarks in the flat at Quiggan Square, and Gort's resolute confidence, not only in himself but in his fellow pilots. Then he went on, in a tone for him of unusual certainty, as though his mind was quite made up on this one, and all that remained was to demonstrate the truth of his reasoning to someone else: "You know, years ago, I undershot a runway and touched down on the grass. It was cold. The ground was frozen hard. Might just as well have *been* the runway."

Dallas shrugged.

"Six months later," Manningham went on, "another aircraft did the same thing on the same runway. It had been raining hard. The grass was a mass of mud. The wheels sank into it. The aircraft somersaulted on to its back." He paused. "There was an Inquiry, of course. Pilot error"

"You must have these Inquiries," Dallas said slowly. "Sometimes, I agree there's a hair's breadth between blame and . . . well, getting away with it. You were lucky."

"Exactly! I was lucky. Gort wasn't." And then, swiftly

following up his advantage: "Hugh, in the course of fifteen years of flying, you must have made a mistake? A bad mistake?"

"Of course."

"And how many pilots in the Company have, too?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You should. In fact, you do. *All* of them."

His arms still leaning against the window-sill, Dallas turned his head. "They didn't end up like Gort's."

"That's not the point. The *making* of a mistake is the point. And though of course it's not likely . . . it *can* happen again to any of you." He cleared his throat. "I often wonder if that's the explanation. The more you all know it can happen, the less willing you are to admit it. No, you say, this can't happen to me. To Allard perhaps. Or Gort. But to me, *no*."

"That was an elementary mistake he made."

"I agree. So elementary that you can't understand why he made it. All he had to do with to push the nose down. But don't you think a lot of pilots made up their minds it was his fault almost as soon as the accident happened? Sometimes, I get the feeling that the normal reflex is to shy away from a pilot in trouble, before some of his error and guilt rubs off. And his fellow captains are reluctant to come forward to defend him too energetically, in case the authorities get the idea they're the sort of people who would make the same mistake themselves!"

"You're exaggerating."

"I don't think so." Manningham gave a wan smile. "But anyway, look at Gort's bright side. It's very bright. How many million safe miles has he got behind him? More than any other two Phoenix pilots put together! He's a good steadying influence on a young Fleet. We're desperately short of jet pilots."

"But on the Super-Express——"

"If it had been the aircraft and not the pilot to blame, would the Phoenix have been taken off the route?"

"They'd make damned certain it wouldn't happen again!"

"Well . . . Gort certainly won't make a mistake like that again. And all I'm asking is for an impartial Check. If he's no good on it, then"—he spread out his hands—"we'll have to

consider the whole thing again. But at least . . . check him and see!"

Dallas wrinkled his forehead. "There's more to it than that. Can't explain it. Can't put it into words. But——" He paused, frowning down at the brown linoleum at his feet. Then he said brusquely, "Surely the Board took some action? Don't they usually award some sort of——"

"Punishment? Oh yes!" Manningham had lifted his head. He was speaking now with a kind of dry bitterness: his fingers not moving, not nervous: no hesitancy at all in his words, as they came out of his mouth with a brittle clarity. "I had him in yesterday. He came dressed as though he was going to Church. You know how he is . . . absolutely correct, grey pinstripe suit, dark red tie . . . and yet somehow still managing to look clumsy. He sat in that seat you've just been sitting in. Arms folded. That impassive look on his face. He said, 'I know what this is for, Edward, so you better get started.' I said, 'I'm sorry, George, but you've been docked three years seniority,' and I waited for him to get angry. But he didn't. He just sat there looking at me, so I had to go on, and I tried to do it lightly . . . 'And consider yourself severely reprimanded.' He kept looking at me as though he was waiting for something more. And then he said, 'Captain Manningham . . . the Company can consider me severely reprimanded if they want to, and write it in my records. But I won't so consider myself, because I've done nothing wrong.' Then he got up and walked to the door. I said, 'It's the Board, George. Not me.' And he turned, just before he went out, and said, 'I know that, Edward. You'll have done your best for me, I'm sure.'"

Manningham stopped. A silence fell between them as he waited for Dallas to comment. But Dallas said nothing. There was so sign of any feeling on his face, except perhaps crossness. He got out his silver case moodily, lit a cigarette, not offering one to Manningham. Then as though he felt caged in, he turned away and put his hands in his pockets, and stood with his back to the Fleet Superintendent between the two vases of pinks, and stayed there—staring down at the busy Ramp below.

Then he turned right round to face Manningham again. "All



right," he said ungraciously. "I warn you, I doubt if he'll make out. But if that's what you want . . . I can't see any harm in giving him a Check."

**5** He's going to miss it, Dallas thought to himself, he's going to miss it anyway.

He watched the huge sunburned hands gripping the stick too tightly, making controlled but still awkward little movements, as Gort flew Phoenix Victor Kilo on instruments along the south-east leg of Hunnington Range. Not like he flew it. Not like a born pilot would fly it, at all—flowing in with the machine, indissolubly joined in a flesh-and-metal marriage—but as though the aircraft was a strong wild animal, to be subdued by his strength and will. He was the master: the Phoenix was the servant. Well, he'd been doing all right till now. Made a terrific effort. Put all his heart and soul into it.

Pity, then, that now he was going to miss it.

The evening light, streaming through his clear windscreen soaked everything—the airbrake lever, the ebony co-pilot's controls, the typewritten *Jet Pilots' Routine Check* that lay already half filled-in on the throttle box—in a kind of thin amber juice.

The other side of the cockpit was bright green. On the captain's windows, the Instrument Flying screens were up. Gort in dark spectacles, looking like a blind man, hunched over the few things he could properly see—the compass, the artificial horizon, the gyro, the airspeed indicator, the altimeter—his eyes in this black world through which, even though the inboard engines were throttled right back, he was hurtling at 170 knots, listening to the only sound that mattered: the morse drone of the Range.

Dallas adjusted the earphones over his head, heard the clicking Ns on the edge merge into the steady note of the middle of the leg, then go right through to the other side—the beam here was narrowing, they were getting closer—into clicking As.

Gort made a slight turn to port. He appeared to be still

bracketing—trying to gauge the drift effect of the wind on the aeroplane. Another left turn. Back into the beam. Now he'd over-corrected: clicking Ns, muzzy Ns, twilight Ns. Then—unmistakable, naked—clear Ns. *Dah Dit. Dah Dit.*

An alarm signal, a warning to do something.

But Gort did nothing. He was going to go clean over to the other side of the Range, get panicky because the cone hadn't shown up, and then proceed to do a let-down five miles or so beyond the station. Something that even experienced airmen did, something that had caused hundreds of accidents, cost thousands of lives. There was only one thing you could do with pilots who descended through cloud, not knowing where they were.

Fail them.

Dallas was not altogether sorry. It would be a clear-cut case. There would be no alternative. No point in giving him another chance, either. They weren't trying to push him through, after all. They were only trying to be fair to him, and after his Check (Dallas said to himself, stirring in the right-hand seat, listening to the whine of the outboards) justice would have been done. He would have had his chance. It would have been proved conclusively that it would be better for everybody if Captain Gort was kept off the Phoenix.

Clear Ns still. *Dah Dit. Dah Dit.* Louder than ever.

The instructor glanced at the altimeter. Still 4000 feet. He was keeping his height well. The airspeed was rocking around—but then, it was blustery up here. Cumulus bulged out into great grey patterns on the horizon. He was making Gort fly on the aural signal of the range, technically the simplest let-down aid in the aircraft, the one least likely to go wrong—just an ordinary radio set, that was all. No visual aids whatsoever. No pointing needle of the radio compass allowed. No flashing fan lights to denote position. The best instrument flying test, he had always found. The pilot had to keep his wits about him to keep orientated, as well as having to cope with flying the aircraft blind.

Clear Ns still.\* Loud and clear. *Dah Dit.*

He saw Gort turn down the volume. So he *must* be hearing

it. He was making small movements. The wings were rocking a little. The gyro swung five degrees to starboard on to 320 degrees. Not nearly enough.

Just behind the two pilots, two Atlas engineers were talking in subdued tones: something technical, something to do with the cabin pressurisation. There was nobody else in the aircraft. Not even Pickering. When the designer had heard that Gort was to be given another chance on the Phoenix, he had first not believed it: and then, when he had realised it was true, had reddened, his boyishness had again abruptly disappeared, and as he had done with Braddock, now he raised his voice at Dallas. Nerves, of course—brilliant men, Dallas knew, no matter what their walk of life, always had nerves. Then he had sat in his office chair, his head in his hands, a picture of petulance, and had started rambling on about his life's work, and risks and some American airline team and Gort—all mixed up together. He had brightened when Dallas had said, "He probably won't make it", and had said "Oh, I see now! Just for the record. All the same, I don't think I'll go up. Not today."

Clear Ns. You'd think he was drugged, mesmerised into inaction by the noise.

Dallas shifted his gaze from the gigantic bubbles of cloud that came gently drifting out of the steady horizon, grew larger, softly exploded, burst on the sharp nose of the Phoenix, sending a shiver through the fuselage, greying over even his windscreen, and looked at the older pilot.

Gort's head was still down: his face burning red. Sweat was streaming over his forehead, across his cheeks, making a rivulet running down his neck. Hot work, instrument flying—it always was. Dallas looked down at his Check Report. A good take-off. He'd done exactly as he'd been always instructed to do: been extra careful, of course, not to get the nose too high: he wouldn't make that mistake again. Steady climb out. Steep turns—he'd lost no height. Assymetrical flying—with two engines throttled back on one side—Dallas had pencilled in *Above average* against that. Instrument flying—well, he wasn't a born pilot, and that of course showed, but he seemed to know what he was doing.

Till now.

*Dah Dit.* Screaming at him: *you're way off the beam.*

He began wondering how he was going to break the news. It had been difficult, right from the start. From the window of the tiny office Atlas Aviation had given him, he'd watched Gort arrive in a small black Wolseley driven by his daughter. He'd got out, had waved to her as she drove away, and had then clumped up into the office as though he was reporting for execution. Dallas had smiled, joked, tried to put him at his ease, pretending this was just an ordinary trip—not at all important—not hurrying, sauntering out together, the instructor's hands in his pockets, chatting: *George this . . . George that.* Beside him, erect, head up, holding his brief case in his left hand, the other arm rigid at the seams of his trousers, walked Captain Gort, now and again nodding his head.

*Dah Dit.* Not quite naked Ns—but almost. Just a tiny film of twilight. *Dah Dit. Dah Dit.*

Can't you hear? *Can't you hear?*

There he sat, from the neck down, immaculate. His uniform jacket was draped carefully on the back of the seat behind him. But his poplin shirt was beautifully white, perfectly ironed. A laundry, you could be certain, not the blonde daughter. His sleeves were turned up in neat cuffs three inches wide all round his upper arms. Dallas thought to himself . . . I'll treat the whole thing on a purely business basis: there were other jobs, other aircraft, other lines. You've got many years' flying in you yet. It's just that——

*Dah Dit. Dah Dit.* A loud dirge of dots and dashes. This is the end!

He saw Gort's hands make a small deliberate move. The right wing went down. Then through his earphones, he heard the twilight rapidly increase, clicking Ns, and almost immediately afterwards, the steady signal. Surprised, he was thinking *the drift must be more than I'd thought*, when, suddenly, all at once, there was a sharp falling away of the signals, a dying into nothing. Eerily now, after such a clattering of morse, there was absolute quiet.

"The cone," Gort said, his hand coming up to punch the stop-watch. "The cone of silence."

He'd hit it, after all—glided into the cone, the central silent hub immediately over the station on which the four loud legs of the range pivoted like spokes: a tiny area, which Gort had found and split right through.

And then—after the silence—came a crescendo of sound, an enormous build-up, swamping through their earphones, drowning all other distinguishable signals.

"Letting down," Gort said. "7000 r.p.m., Field Approach Check."

Dallas drew back the outboard throttles.

Gort slowly let the Phoenix descend for three minutes, before doing a procedure turn on to the leg; and coming, the opposite way now back towards the airfield, split the cone again, and then, with port drift, still holding the steady signal, kept on coming down, positioning the aircraft nicely for landing, till at 300 feet, Dallas said, "Not bad. I've got it!"

Gort produced a handkerchief, and mopped his wet red face.

"Want a breather? Bit of a rest? A smoke perhaps?"

The dark glasses still over his eyes, Gort shook his head.

"Right! I'll take it up to 2000, and then you can do an I.L.S."

Half an hour later, after Gort had doggedly completed a let-down using the yellow and blue dial of the Instrument Landing System and an approach on the Zero Reader, Dallas took down the green screens, put the dark glasses back in their case, and said, "Just the landing now, George."

Gort swung the aircraft round in a wide sweep of the airfield. His face was set and mask-like, no longer sweating. When he called for the *Before Landing Check*, his voice was controlled and cold. In the cockpit, however, there was still an air of tension, a grim unspoken struggle against a background of the sibilant whine of the jets, the quiet voices of the engineers behind, and in front, facing them through the windscreens, the cloudscape continually altering, the sky shot through with the colours of the end of the day, the line of the hills dark under the overcast.

Dallas gave him the gear. The Phoenix, slowed down now by the undercarriage, flew lower, her wings erratically unstable in the gusting westerly wind.

"8000 r.p.m.," Gort called, and Dallas beside him moved all four throttles forward.

Three hundred feet. Still some way from the field. Quite a lot of power on. Two hundred feet. A hundred feet. Over the edge now. Past the runway threshold.

Nose up, that's right! He's doing a classic cross-wind landing: just how the text-books say it should be done. Kick off half the drift. Brush the wheels on the tarmac. Swing the aircraft straight with a touch of rudder. Let the nose-wheel slowly sink on to the ground. Beautiful!

But all Dallas said was: "Taxi over to the Production Hangar, would you?"

As they rolled round the taxi-track, Dallas wrote on the Check Report: *approach good, landing excellent*.

On the concrete apron, the aircraft stopped. Gort locked the brakes full on. After all four jets had been shut down, the two engineers left. It was usual now for the Checker to give a little talk to the Checked. In private.

As Gort turned to lift his jacket off the chair, Dallas saw the damp sweat-mark, round and big as a soup-plate, on the back of his shirt. The older pilot slid his arms into the sleeves, did up the buttons and belt, sat back in his seat.

And waited.

Dallas, rubbing his pencil up and down between his palms, looked at his Report, now all filled in: ticks, remarks, signed. He had still not made up his mind. Now the Check was over, he felt himself most unfairly pilloried. He had not expected Gort to come out of it so well. Must have put everything he'd got into it, of course. All the same, what could he say if he *didn't* pass him? Everything had been done according to the Book. Yet if he *did* pass him, there was Pickering to be considered. He could imagine Juud's face, when the Flight Captain got back. And then there was the responsibility—

He had to say something. "Well," he began slowly, "I thought you kept a bit too long in the N signal."

Stony-faced, Gort said, "I'd got the drift. I knew where I was."

"Ye-es . . . I grant you that. But——"

"The wind was strong and gusting. I didn't want to be blown to and fro between the As and the Ns."

Logical. Unanswerable. So *that* was finished. Done with.

"Otherwise——" Suddenly he could think of nothing to say to the man, as they sat side by side in this stationary, silent aeroplane, except: "You were on form today."

Immediately, he felt the figure in the captain's seat stiffen. "I am always available at any time for further checking."

Oh God, Dallas thought, the older they get, the more prickly they become! He hesitated; wondered whether under the circumstances that might not be advisable. If the weather had been any better, he could have said conditions were too easy. Of course, everyone felt sorry for Gort; but on this job, more than any other, pity couldn't come into it.

"Or perhaps you would like a second opinion?" Having waited so long without hearing from him, Gort was again speaking. "Someone else to check me out on another day?"

On his high horse, his dignity! Got no imagination, only sees his own side of the picture, doesn't understand the ins and outs, the complications, the responsibilities!

"If you could tell me where I went wrong, Captain Dallas? The points to watch? Where I deviated from the technique of flying I have been instructed in?"

Dallas turned, and seeing Gort's face, was struck by the raw brilliance of those round blue eyes as unblinking they stared at him.

Suddenly, he thought . . . to hell with them! George Gort had put up a good show, why shouldn't he tell him so? You couldn't always be worrying about politics and side issues. He was the Training expert, he'd tell the truth as he read it, in black and white, here on the Check Report in front of him. He said, "That was one of the best checks I've ever done on anybody."

Then he started to get out of his seat, and cheerfully, now it was over, feeling better, completely better, flung on his jacket and smiled,

"You mean——" Gort still sat in his seat, looking at him.

"Yes, of course. We're short of captains. 'From this moment . . . you're on the roster.'"

I'm glad he's pleased, Dallas thought. So am I—really. At least, I *think* I am.

They left the flight deck together. They walked down the empty passenger cabin, very cheerful, back into informality.

Gort smiling, stood aside at the door, waved him forward to be the first to descend the steps to the ground.

Outside, it had started to rain—only slightly, just dribs-and-drabs, left over from an uncertain day. Engineers were engaging a tractor tow-bar on to the nose-wheel of Victor Kilo, preparatory to pulling it into the dry interior of the hangar.

Gort said, "My car should be in the car park. My daughter said she'd call for me."

Dallas looked at his watch. Past eight. "I'm afraid we've kept her waiting."

"Oh that's all right! She won't mind."

"I'll come with you. It's on my way."

They walked together towards the main factory administration buildings. Among the scattering of cars parked outside, Dallas was conscious of the girl's face, before he recognised the black Wolseley. Through the rain-pocked windscreen, she was watching them come closer. She'll be wondering, Dallas thought, wondering how he got on.

But if she was, the cool green eyes did not show it.

Gort led the way to the open driver's window. She must have known, by the way he looked at her. All he said—briefly, half under his breath—was: "Fine." And then, out in the open, publicly now, politely, "I believe you've met Captain Dallas, Charlotte."

Dallas saw the unhurried eyes switch from her father's face to his. No change of expression. She gave nothing away. "Yes, we've met." Then—perhaps a smile, perhaps not, difficult to tell: "How are you?"

"I'm all right . . . thanks."

Gort put his foot on the running-board, and said, "I'm hungry, Charlotte! Ravenous! And I expect Hugh is, too."

"A bit," Dallas said. "We've been up quite a time."

"How about having a bite of supper with us?"

"A bite of supper?" The usual repetition, to give himself



time to think. Turning, about to accept, he looked to the girl to repeat the invitation. But she said nothing. Her face was still expressionless. "That's kind of you, George, but——"

It wouldn't do, anyway. It would look too much like, well——

Not that Gort meant it. Just wanted to show some friendliness. It's his way of saying thank you. "Tonight, I can't make it, I'm afraid."

"Well then, some other time?"

"I'd like that . . . very much."

"Quiggan Square, that's where we live. Number 2, Flat 6. You'll know Quiggan Square?"

"Quiggan Square? I'll find it, anyway."

"Glad to see you, any time." Gort walked round the front of the car, and got in beside his daughter. He waved his leather brief-case, as the girl leaned forward to pull the self-starter.

Dallas watched the straight, old-fashioned back of the Wolseley move away, over the wet tarmac to the entrance gates. It was stopped by the policeman, then turned left, to disappear along the main London Road. With his hands in his pockets, he walked across the tarmac, up the steps of the administration buildings, and mounted the stairs to his office.

He put on the light. He took off his uniform cap. He had just dumped his brief-case on the floor when suddenly he was conscious of a curious rushing sound outside.

Not like a jet engine in the test bed. More like the *whooshing* of the wind, with the hum of powerful electric generators in the background.

Dallas knew what it was. But all the same, he was surprised. He went over to the window. Beyond the main assembly hall, he could see its brick and iron barrel-shape, its sides ablaze with bright yellow rectangles in the midst of the dark factory around it. He stayed there for a few moments, looking out at it, listening to the huge propeller that thrashed up the artificial airflow. He had never known the wind tunnel to be in operation at this time of night before.

He shrugged his shoulders. They had work to do. So had he.

He returned to his desk. He sat there quite still, reviewing the details of the evening's achievement, looking through the

Check Report, remembering the care and accuracy of the flying he had watched.

Then he took out his pen and summarised it in the Training Record Book: July 11th, Captain G. Gort . . . *Very Satisfactory*.

Next day, Dallas said to Manningham: "He did all right. Very well, in fact."

The Fleet Superintendent looked up from signing the letter on his desk. "Good! I'm glad!"

"I was surprised."

"Were you?" Manningham asked. "Why?"

"He was so much better than last time. Still a bit on the rough side, of course——"

"George never was and never will be what I call an *elegant* pilot."

"No . . ." Dallas smiled. "Still, he flew with an almost unholy accuracy. Steeled himself to it, I suppose."

"I think George steels himself to everything he does."

"Oh well, anyway——" Elaborately, Dallas stretched his arms above his head. "That's over and done with." He took out his silver case, offered it to Manningham (who shook his head) and then lit up a cigarette himself. "One other thing . . . after Saturday there won't be another Training aircraft available at the factory for nearly a fortnight." He blew a cloud of grey-blue smoke in front of him. "All right if I do a trip down the Route?"

"Ground school can manage without you . . . can they?"

"I think so. The new Course is in. They've settled down."

"All right then. The roster'll be glad to have you. They're short of captains."

"Still five services a week?"

"Still five. We can't go up to six till we get another aircraft."

Dallas tapped the ash off his cigarette and smiled. "If Pickering has his way . . . that'll be *never*."

"Pickering?" Manningham tossed the letter into his *Out* tray.

"I suppose he knows about George?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose he's pleased."

Manningham fished another letter out of the pile in front of him, and began to read it with deliberate unconcern.

"He'll get over it. Anyway, I've never liked this . . . well, love affair I suppose you could call it, between us and Atlas. Parties, dinners, Christian names——"

"Atlas are all right really," Dallas said, remembering his own share in the hospitality. "They have their problems, too. Just as we have ours."

"I suppose so," Manningham said unenthusiastically, bending his head over the next item from the *In* tray.

Dallas watched him for a moment before saying, "D'you want me to wait till Judd gets back before I go on a trip?"

"Oh no." Manningham did not look up. "No need. He won't be back for a week or so."

"Where is he now?"

"Sydney."

"Still busy arranging the extension of the Route?"

"And sending these." The Fleet Superintendent held up a sheaf of teletype papers. "He doesn't spare himself."

Dallas said nothing. A silence fell between them. Manningham went on working for a while, seemingly in a state of utter concentration on the Voyage Report in front of him. Then he lifted his head and said, "Hugh."

"Yes?"

"D'you worry at all . . . passing people fit to fly the Route?"

"Worry?" Dallas raised his eyebrows. "No . . . why should I? They have to satisfy me. I check everything I can. What else can I do?"

He might just as well—Dallas thought to himself on Saturday afternoon, as he climbed out of the aircraft after two hours of circuits and landings with Braddock—give the Gorts a ring.

There would not be another Phoenix available, so there was nothing else to do. He had been along to Operations that morning, and had arranged a trip for himself down the Route on

Tuesday. On the roster, he noticed that Captain Gort had taken off on the Singapore Express-Service that same morning. The girl, therefore, would be on her own, and might welcome the chance (this time) of coming along to the theatre with him.

He sauntered across from the hangars to the Atlas Aviation administrative buildings with the Australian, said so-long to him on the steps, and was walking along the corridor towards his box of an office, when he passed Pickering.

The designer nodded. Coldly.

Not to be outdone, Dallas nodded coldly back. This ill-feeling, after all, was Pickering's choice. He had to be shown, in any case, the line where his job ended, and Dallas' began. The pilot had himself scrupulously observed his own frontier. There were several things about aircraft designing he might have said, such as: look, I know you've never had a pressurisation failure, or a window go, but since the crew are given oxygen masks, the passengers should have them, too. Or: look, the Phoenix is so aerodynamically perfect, it's hell trying to stop, even on a medium-sized runway. Or: look, a consumption of fifteen hundred gallons an hour!

He had not done so, partly because Pickering knew infinitely more than he did on the subject, and would have obviously brought such points under consideration, partly because he had long ago discovered that the designer resented criticism anyway, and partly because - like all the other Fleet pilots--in his heart he was proud of the privilege and honour of flying the Phoenix, and considered that any niggling on minor points would be unworthy of so magnificent an overall design.

Pickering would, as Manningham had said, get over it.

He pushed open the door of his office, and sitting at his desk, finished off the paper work for the training flight. Then he looked at his watch. Past four. If he was going to ring up, he'd better do it quickly.

He picked up the daily paper he'd brought in that morning, and turned to the *Entertainments* page. Better have some plan prepared. He started looking down the alphabetical list of theatres. She looked the high-browed type. He seemed to remember Gort quoting Shakespeare. Something fairly heavy

would be required. His eyes stopped at the O's—the Old Vic.

Putting on his coat, he stuffed the paper into his pocket, and then locked up his office. This time, there was nobody in the corridor. Outside, it was pelting with rain, and he had to dash across the car park to his red M.G.

He drove slowly to the main gate, checked out with the police guard, and then, turning left, went swishing along the main London road towards the small service flatlet he rented in Kensington.

He stopped at the first telephone box. He thumbed through the E-K directory—G, Ge, Go . . . Gort, George, Captain. Believed in putting in his title. 2, Quiggan Square. Mayfair 9812.

He put in four pennies and dialled. When a girl's voice answered, he pressed Button A and said, "Is that Miss Gort?"

"Yes."

"This is Dallas. Hugh Dallas."

"Hugh Dallas . . . oh yes!" Then: "My father's out on service."

With commendable surprise: "Oh, is he?"

"He went out today. But he'll be back next Saturday, if you'd like to——"

"I expect he was glad to get back on the Route."

"He was *very* glad."

"Kind of him, I thought, to ask me along to your place the other day."

"He was sorry you couldn't come."

"And now *I'm* sorry he's away, because I hoped . . . well, your father's rather keen on Shakespeare, isn't he?"

"He's been to one of the plays, certainly."

"You see . . . I've booked three seats tonight for Henry VI, Part Three. But anyway, *you'll* be able to make it, won't you?"

"Not tonight, I'm afraid."

A caution: "It's the last night, you know."

"Then I shall just have to be unlucky."

A reminder: "I wouldn't want to miss it myself——"

"Of course not."

A final warning: "I don't often get a free evening——"

No defence of any kind was produced from the other end of the line. It had occurred to him that he might suggest going out on Monday, but now he thought: why should I? This was the second time of asking, after all. She should surely have made some follow-up, however tentative, to her father's invitation. Not to do so was not only ungracious and ungrateful, it was downright impolite, and he had no hesitation whatever in making the sentence a stiff one: "—so tonight I shall certainly go on my own."

She took it calmly. There was a short discussion on what a pity it was, then they both said good night to each other perfectly politely, and Dallas rung off.

When her voice had completely faded away (for it left an oddly recurring echo in his ears), he stood with his feet apart, swaying a little on his heels. From the mirror above the telephone, a rather pink face stared out moodily. Encircling him was the sound of the rain on the road and the sight of the water streaming down the glass sides of the box. He pulled out the newspaper from his coat pocket, and propped it up on the ledge, the *Entertainments*' page still uppermost.

This time, his eyes began at the O's and ended at the V's. Then, without looking in the directory, he inserted four more pennies and dialled.

She might, of course, be on service. The other girl might be there, though. She shared a flat with another Phoenix stewardess.

But she wasn't. That unmistakable voice said huskily: "Grosvenor 2632."

"Hello, Joyce."

Straightaway: "Hello, Hugh."

"Doing anything tonight?"

"Well, I'm supposed to be going out with someone——"

"With me—now. You can fix that, can't you? Say you've been called out unexpectedly for service."

"Is that what you say?"

"That's what I say."

"So I suppose *I* can." She paused. When she spoke again, her voice was lower. "Anyway, *unexpectedly's* right. It's been so long since that trip we did, I thought——"

Momentarily, in his mind he saw the creamy-skinned face, the soft waves of chestnut-coloured hair. She would be pouting now—the bright red lips bunched up in a reproachful rose. He had first met Joyce Mitchell on a trip three months ago, when she had been the stewardess. In London, he'd taken her out five or six times. Then he had flown with her—it had been quite a memorable trip—again. Before she could finish the sentence, on an impulse, he said, "I'm taking the Singapore service on Tuesday. What about you? You can fix that, too, can't you?"

"I think I can. I'll try, anyway."

"Good! Now . . . about tonight. A revue, I thought. There's one at the Vaudeville. Sounds French. Might be amusing."

"That'll be lovely!"

"Pick you up at seven, then."

"Thank you." She said it meekly, sweetly, gratefully. That Gort girl, he remembered, had not even said *thank you for calling*. The two voices were completely different: different in tone and texture: different in pitch and character. This one was warm and vibrant: the other one was cold and hard. He was glad now he'd been given the opportunity to discover such differences by direct comparison.

He was given an even better opportunity later that same evening. He had just bought tickets for the circle, and was walking over to where Joyce Mitchell, in a Persian lamb jacket and a black taffeta frock, was waiting for him in the foyer, when he saw her with a tall thin man in grey.

He said: "Hello."

She said: "Hello."

When he came up to her, Joyce Mitchell said immediately: "Who's that?"

"You know Captain Gort?"

"Of course I do . . . and that's not him!"

"No." Dallas smiled. "That's his daughter."

"Oh." Her eyes were fixed on the face, the fair hair, the figure in the red dress. "I see. What does she do?"

"She's a doctor's secretary, I believe."

"Well . . . I'm glad she's not a stewardess. Otherwise"—she gave his hand a certain possessive squeeze—"you might be arranging to go out on service with *her* on Tuesday."

Three minutes afterwards, as the tide of the audience swept them up the stairs to the Circle, she and her escort were just in front. Joyce was talking about a special trip she'd done, taking some V.I.P.s to Cairo, when he heard Charlotte Gort say to the man she was with: "We've come to the right theatre, Bill? Sure this isn't the Old Vic?"

And as he was protesting in a puzzled kind of way that he was *perfectly sure*, she was looking over her silken shoulder.

And catching Dallas' eye - she smiled.

6 "Hugh! 'tugh! Where are you *going*?"  
He was half-way down the steps of the verandah and he turned impatiently. Joyce Mitchell from her chaise-longue by the palms was pouting at him prettily.

"Out."

"So I see. But *where*?"

"Into town."

"*Walking*?"

"Yes, walking."

She pushed back her floppy straw hat, removed her sunglasses, blinked her blue eyes at him reproachfully. "In *this* heat?"

"In this heat." He gave her a quick cross smile, and was walking on, when she sat up, and said, "Hey, wait for me!" She began to pull down her skirt from high above her bare knees with exaggerated modesty. She reached for her cup on the table beside her. "Just let me finish my tea, and comb my hair." She touched the red-brown waves lovingly.

"Can't," he said, without looking round again. "Robinson



closes the town office at five." He thrust out his wrist and looked at his watch. "I want to cash a letter of credit."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" She was all smiles. "Well, I'll see you there."

When he didn't answer she stood up and leaned over the balustrade. "Hugh! Did you hear me? I'll see you there, shall I, Hugh?"

"If you like."

The Imperial Hotel was in the west end of Ranjibad. That meant walking through the narrow market streets, past the open *boutiques*, hung with pots and pans, bright with green peppers, bananas, vegetables, mangoes, roofed in thatch or rough tile, an occasional palm tree standing sentinel beside them, wilting in the dust and heat. Hindus. Afghans, boys in white loin-cloths and men in linen suits mixed it with bullock carts, cars and bicycles on the cobbles in the middle of the road—till further on, when he reached the railway station, the throngs thinned. When he went over the bridge into the courtyard, except for waiting taxis, the place was empty and there, in front of him, as he stepped on the wider pavement, it seemed that the Dhammaratu Road was on fire.

And no wonder, he thought. Everything was so parched and dry—ready at a moment's notice, given half a chance, to flash up and join this conflagration of red flowers on the flame trees that burned in front of the shimmering five-storey white houses. The road between was sticky and black with running tar. A few rickshaws moved, infinitely slowly. Cars came up and down, their bodies too hot to touch. The best shops were along here, proud of their plate glass windows—car showrooms, big provision stores, tea merchants, best Pakistani ladies' fashions. Inside, they gave the promise of coolness. Outside, the window displays were for the most part discreet and European, and nobody was looking at them.

Except for Number 64. Obviously, there was some attraction at Number 64, the Town Office of British Empire Airways. A knot of people were standing in the hot sunshine—four small brown boys, a Sikh with his black hair hidden in a turban, a dapper Indian in white topi, white duck suit, black shoes, a young

woman humping a baby, and an old man with a beard and a begging bowl.

Dallas stopped. All of them—Dallas included—stared curiously and in silence at Mr. Robinson's now giant-sized window display of the Route of the Phoenix: London—Rome—Cairo—Ranjibad—Calcutta—Singapore. 7500 miles. Five services a week each way. *Fly at five hundred miles an hour on the fastest Route in the World!*

Mr. Robinson—who knew the East, after practically a lifetime, as well as the back of his coffee-coloured hand—had had the whole map done in relief, so that it looked like a toy, waiting to be played with. There was the Mediterranean, painted an unbelievable blue, the white sugar-lumps of the Alps, the yellow sands of Cairo and Arabia Deserta, the burnt mud brown of India, the soaking lush green heat of the Malay jungle and Singapore. Rome was represented by a small plasticine St. Peter's, and London by similar models of the House of Commons and Buckingham Palace. He had hit on the happy idea—for the Manager was a traditionalist at heart and it was his trouble that these days, together with the whole of his Anglo-Indian race, he could find so few traditions to hang on to—of showing something of what had happened in the five thousand years since civilisation started. Nineveh and Babylon—those were the birth places—situated where conditions were perfect, warmed by a sun that had for so many millions of years run a clockwork seven-hour schedule from Singapore to London which even the Phoenix could not compete with. Intelligent, something of a scholar, Mr. Robinson had shown the camel caravans of the Assyrians come to conquer that vital centre of the route, in the seventh century B.C. Then models of the Persians, following them two hundred years later. Alexander had vanquished a good deal of it. So had the Romans, moving now over towards the north-west, eventually losing the eastern side to Islam. In the thirteenth century came the Moguls to the Persian Gulf and Northern India. Lastly came the British, mopping up most of the trade and the oil-fields; and now in the process of departing from the troubled area, were leaving instead—there it was, attached by wire to the top of the window—the new overlord of the Route: *the Phoenix*.

Dallas smiled, dissociated himself from the rest of the audience, and pushed open the glass door. Inside, it was just as quiet as outside—but cooler. An old fan, as big as a propeller, rotated on the ceiling. Two Pakistani typists, one in a bright and shiny peacock blue dress and the other in a green sari, were typing at desks. An Indian Station Officer in uniform was standing at the counter. He showed his teeth, white against his face, in a smile of recognition as Dallas came in.

"Mr. Robinson in?"

"Yes, sah."

The pilot walked across the gleaming linoleum to the door marked *Manager*. He knocked, and then went inside. Mr. Robinson was sitting at his desk, surrounded by papers. A sallow, yellowy face, pockmarked paunchy cheeks, burning brown eyes. Though he got up when he saw Dallas, his smile was not so white and wide and welcoming as the Station Officer's had been. In the office, there was a most curious smell—coconut-oil? moth-balls? incense? French perfume?—that might possibly come from the fragrant ointment that sleeked down the black Anglo-Indian hair.

Dallas, utterly assured, said kindly, "I've just been admiring your display."

"Oh yes, Captain . . . the display." The sing-song Welsh-like voice, under a broader European top note than usual: the hissing *s*, the buzzing *ee*.

"It's very good."

"We do the best we can to attract the customers."

Dallas sat down, put one leg over another. "Business picking up?"

"A little." Mr. Robinson shrugged his shoulders in a European way. "*Very* little." He made a sudden Oriental gesture of resignation with his curiously pale palmed hands. "We are still sending them out with empty seats. The first full load we ever had——"

"—happened to be in Victor Fox, the night of the crash. Yes . . . that was bad luck." Dallas put his hand in the pocket of his lightweight jacket for his pen and his wallet, and took out his letter of credit. "A hundred rupees, please." And then: "Made a difference, I suppose."

"Of course, Captain! It is a small community here. Government officials, business men, so on. After so much publicity about the Phoenix . . . they talked. Now they still talk, but in a different way. Not quite so——"

"It'll soon pick up again."

"But it is the competition! Air France, Pan American, T.W.A., K.L.M., Air India, B.O.A.C. Even the Belgians now. And soon the Germans!"

"None of them have got the Phoenix. We do the trip in half the time."

"—then there is the time of departure. Almost midnight for the westbound, three in the morning for the eastbound. Nobody wants to leave at such times!"

"Yes . . . I see that. Too bad! But you've just got to fit in with the best departure and arrival times from England and Singapore."

"—so the Phoenix is full from London, full from Singapore. But at Ranjibad, more people get off than get on. So Captain Judd says . . . *what is the matter with Ranjibad?*" Again came the oriental gesture, the resignation. Accepted by neither the Asiatic nor the European community, Mr. Robinson knew that he lived on a tight-rope. A chee-chee, a man five annas short of the rupee, could not expect security, and he was aware—Captain Judd, who had an almost Aryan belief in the relative positions of the races of the world, had made it perfectly plain—that it was the airline's growing conviction that a one hundred per cent Englishman could do better in Ranjibad.

"There . . . I've signed it. Date . . . eighteenth, isn't it? One hundred rupees, please!" Mr. Robinson knew perfectly well that this was the signal to change the subject. He unlocked one of the drawers of his desk, and took out his cash box. Opening it, he said, both for conversation and encouragement, "You find the Imperial Hotel comfortable, Captain?"

"Not bad."

"It is better, now you are separated from the piston-engined crews?"

"Much better."

"It is the best hotel in Pakistan."

The Manager noticed the surprise in the next two words "Is it?", and sighed to himself as he counted out a hundred rupees. It was his private opinion, expressed in the sanctity of his red-tiled bungalow, with its paw-paw trees sidgiting their fat green many-fingered leaves round the verandah, and then only to his wife, that the Phoenix crews would never be satisfied until the Company had built for them, here in Ranjibad, a modernised, glittering, refrigerated version of the Taj Mahal.

Captain Dallas was thinking that no hotel could compensate for the enforced two days' wait—there was no service ex London on Wednesday—in Ranjibad with its Pakistan liquor prohibition and the resultant high price of beer.

"There you are, Captain."

"Thanks." Dallas put out his hand across the desk for the money, and as he did so, he noticed, lying on the top of the other papers, a cutting from a weekly newspaper, a press photograph of the Phoenix from the *Ranjibad Times*. "Good," he said. "A bit of free publicity, eh?"

Instead of the money, he picked up the cutting and looked at it.

"Free . . . yes." Mr. Robinson put his hands together and picked at his dusky lips with the tips of his fingers. "But not *good* publicity."

It was the photograph of an airline pilot, climbing out of a Phoenix. It was not a good photograph—muzzy, underdeveloped—but the characteristic square stance was unmistakable. It was entitled: *The Commander of the British Empire Airways jet airliner Victor Delta steps off his aircraft on his arrival from England yesterday. This is the first time Captain Gort has been to Ranjibad since the accident in which he was involved at the local airport last May.*

"You see, Captain, now there will be more talk." The droll look on his face was half sad, half comical. "Oh, the *Times* means it well, I am sure, but it is the unfortunate way they do it—"

"Don't worry about talk! Talk won't do you any harm." Then sharply: "And if it's Captain Gort you're worried about, you needn't. I passed out Captain Gort myself, before he came

back on the Route. There is nothing the matter with Captain Gort!"

"Oh, I *know*, Captain. Captain Gort is very nice. One of the best. A gentleman. But——"

Hesitantly now, waving his hands, regretting it, fearing he had gone too far, Mr. Robinson watched Dallas count out the rupees, slip them in his wallet, put the wallet in the inside pocket of his jacket. He was going to let the subject rest there, to stop, even though his apprehension was so compulsive, but now he was jerked forward, forced to go onwards by Dallas looking up and coldly demanding, "You were saying?"

The hands waved again "I am not a pilot."

Colder still, an agreement: "No."

"I cannot judge."

Coldest yet: "No."

Mr. Robinson leaned half-way across his desk. Small beads of sweat had collected on his forehead. In an effort to establish some basis of common communication that was not altogether negative, his voice had gone shriller. "But Captain . . . I can *compare*!"

"How d'you mean . . . compare?"

"The take-off eastbound last Sunday . . . I watched it."

"Why . . . what happened?"

"Well . . . nothing, Captain." Mr. Robinson looked slightly abashed. "Except that I said to young Giskin, my S.O., who was standing beside me, 'That is Captain Gort taking off.'"

"You knew damned well it was Captain Gort taking off!"

"Oh yes, I know, Captain. But what I meant was . . . nobody seems to take off a Phoenix *quite* like Captain Gort."

"In what way?"

The manager hesitated. "He gets the nose up quicker than most of the others do. I've seen a lot of Phoenix take-offs——"

"In the middle of the night . . . from over a mile away . . . at a very sharp angle."

"I can still judge by the navigation lights, and sometimes you can see quite——"

Severely: "You can never judge attitude by lights!"

The Oriental gesture again, more pronounced than ever. Meekly: "You know best, Captain. I just thought——"

"I think what happened in May has made rather too deep an impression on you, Mr. Robinson."

The pale palms waved. "Possibly, Captain, *possibly*. But such a tragedy naturally——"

Dallas had stood up now. He had a habit, when he was irritated, of being exaggeratedly casual. "I'm keeping you. Past five." And then: "Thank you for the cash."

Ingratiatingly: "A pleasure, Captain."

With his hand on the door knob, Dallas said, "And don't get excited about take-off technique. That's my worry. What Captain Judd wants . . . what we all want from you . . . is a full Phoenix out of Ranjibad. Every trip, not once in a blue moon! That's *your* worry!"

The glass rattled a little as he closed the Manager's door. The typists had gone. The office was empty. He was walking past the deserted seats where the embarking passengers waited, when a hand gently tugged his arm.

"Hugh! You'd forgotten me!" Joyce Mitchell turned her face up to his. He glanced down at her, frowned and then smiled. At least she had used the last half-hour, he thought wryly, better than he had. He let his eyes wander over her appreciatively.

"Hugh!" she said in a different voice, lowering her eyes, slipping the hand now right through the crook of his arm. "Do I look nice? *Do I?*"

"Mmm." He bent slightly over her head, catching the warm spicey tang of her perfume. The small straw hat with the wired yellow rose brushed his cheek. "Not bad."

She seemed quite pleased. She began to fiddle with the buttons that went all the way down her slim lemon dress, as though to draw his attention to its perfection. "Ted Wilson"—her eyes slanted at him slyly—"said I looked wonderful."

"Good!" He opened the door for her, and watched her as she went through.

"You know," she sighed, "you were simply ages." She made a hopeless gesture with her thin arms. "I thought I'd missed you."

Outside, nobody now was watching Mr. Robinson's new window display. Dallas stood there, staring at it abstractedly.

She gave a gentle pull on his arm, as though to remind him that she was there, and they were going somewhere, weren't they? "Whatever were you *doing*? You couldn't have been all *that* time cashing a letter of credit. Or was it so much, that he had to send to the bank?"

He made no comment. They began walking down the Dhammaratu Road. Rather crossly, she said, "What *did* make you so long, Hugh?"

There was a moment's silence. Then he said very distinctly, "Nothing to do with you, Joyce."

Under her soft peachy make-up, her face went pinker. Half petulantly, half playfully she said, "How you love putting people in their places, don't you, Hugh?"

"No." Again he spoke slowly and clearly. "I prefer people to stay in their places to begin with."

"I see." She slightly slackened her hold on his arm. She began to show great interest in the windows on *her* side of the street. After a while she said with soft deceptive meekness, "I'm in mine now, Hugh."

She slid her indigo blue eyes under the long lashes up to his face. They were moist. They had, he often reflected, a curious emotional property of their own, so that they could sadden and soften and fill with tears like big film eyes. "I may," she said demurely, "call you Hugh, *may* I?"

He said gravely, "You may."

They both smiled.

"You're rather a swine," she said tenderly, holding him tight again. "I love them, you know."

"You love them all," he said.

"I have," she was laughing now, gay as a child, "a very affectionate nature."

"Like hell you have!" he said.

"Hugh!" Her mouth was round and shocked, but ready to laugh again if he would. When he said nothing, she shrugged her shoulders, swinging herself along beside him, glancing at the shops, half smiling at some of the passers-by, biting her lip.



"What's the matter, Hugh?" She pressed herself a little against him, leaning forward, so that he *had* to look at her. Coaxingly: "Tell me, Hugh?"

"Nothing's the matter. I'm just thinking."

"Hugh! Hugh!" She laughed in mock outrage. "You *shouldn't!* Not with *me!*" She was still smiling, but her eyes travelled quickly over his face, a faint threat of irritation just creasing her brows.

"You certainly make it difficult to," he said.

She bowed her head, looking half contrite, half rebellious. Then she said slowly, "I didn't know that you took me out to . . . to"—she shot him a long sultry glance, full of meaning—"to think."

She added a low laugh. But it was all wasted on him.

He said coldly, "I didn't bring you out. You came."

One by one, the flame trees slipped by them. At Ranjibad railway station, up and down they went over the bridge, back into the bazaar on the other side of the tracks.

"Hugh?" Her hand slid down over his wrist, her long fingers gently, wheedlingly, inserted themselves under his. "Hugh?"

"Mmm?"

"Don't you like me"—her voice went softer, sadder—"any more?"

It was even more crowded now: the street vendors selling coffee, betel-nut—crying out, ringing their bells—fezzes, topis, turbans, Astrakhan fur hats bobbing up and down, covering the cobbles. Just in the shade of their open shops sat the proprietors in shirts and white trousers, calling out now and again at the English couple as they passed.

Dallas strode on, hands in his pockets, head down, neither seeing nor hearing. With an effort, as though her voice had just penetrated, he said unemotionally, "Of course I still like you."

She lowered her eyes, murmuring in a savage mockery, just loud enough for him to hear, "Of course I still like you!" She drew in a furious breath, "Like! *Like!*" She wanted to dig her nails into the thick part of his arm. Instead, she began to fiddle with the brim of her hat, to make ineffectual little smoothing

gestures to her skirt which the slight wind now flapped against her knees.

A group of men standing in the shadow of a fruit tree stared. One of them made some remark. They all nodded. They went on staring, admiring.

Slightly mollified, she broke the vow of absolute silence she had just made to herself. "Just where are we going, Hugh? If I'm allowed to ask, that is?"

"Shopping." He gave her a small smile. "And you are allowed."

More cheerfully: "Nice!"

She had a sudden glimpse of themselves in a mirror outside a junk-shop doorway, saw with satisfaction that Dallas was watching her.

"Shopping for what, Hugh?" She let her eyes fall on baskets, bags, golden bracelets, filigree brooches, jewelled rings. Softly, "That's why you didn't want me to come?"

Her hand was back again, stroking his wrist. A crush of people suddenly bumped against them. Her cheek brushed his.

"I thought I'd get silk. A dress length makes quite a nice present, don't you think?"

"A nice present for *who*, Hugh?"

"My sister."

"Your *sister*, Hugh? I didn't know you'd *got* a sister."

"Well, I have. And it's her birthday next week."

"*Lucky* sister!"

He took no notice of the tone of her voice. He just said, "Tell me if you see a likely shop, would you?"

She said nothing. Her mouth had gone into a thick soft red pout. She swung her hips as she walked. She held her bag with both her hands.

"I'm too busy thinking," she said under her breath.

He turned sharp left. Unexpectedly—for she went on forward, into a crowd of white-robed women haggling round a betel seller. A huge bread-fruit tree cast its shadow down on all of them. Coconuts were piled high on one stall, and sticks of bananas hung from hooks under a palm thatched roof. A gas jet, flaring out ragged, spilled its light needlessly into the sunny street. There

was, stronger than the everlasting dust, a stench of cheroots, mixed with the decaying smells of fruit and meat.

A cloth sari brushed her shoulder where Dallas had been. She walked on, head high, aware now of what had happened. Aware that in a moment he would be running after her. She had a sudden urge to rush forward and lose herself in the throng. Her imagination painted a vivid picture of Hugh Dallas, searching, jerked out of his preoccupied disregard of her.

She hurried on, smiling to herself. A dark face under a turban smiled back. She frowned. It went on smiling.

She looked around and she was cut off, swamped, flooded by figures. She hesitated. A withered grey-brown arm proffered fruit. People behind jostled. The little straw hat was knocked slightly sideways. "Look where you're going!" she said shrilly. Someone jangled a handful of bright beads in her face. She saw the dead fish colour of a blind beggar's eyes. Her small sandalled foot trod in some filth. She screamed, "Hugh! Hugh! Where are you?"

Uncomprehending, people glanced at her, smiled, swept on, seemed to be trying to sweep her with them.

Then Dallas took hold of her wrist, coming up behind her, pulling her after him.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" he threw at her over his shoulder. And without penitence: "I thought you were going to get yourself lost."

She gulped. They had stopped now, there in the shadow of the side-street. Feeling tears standing in her eyes, she lifted her face so that they might be a reproach to him. She shivered in the sudden shade, and immediately her body took up the themes, sending tremors through her limbs, transmitted to him through the tight hold she had of his arm.

"I was lost!"

"Of course you weren't! You were only gone a minute or two!" And then, half laughing, half genuinely sympathetic: "You're shaking like a leaf! Silly"—but he had bent his head to whisper into her ear, as if to a child—"to run in the wrong direction!"

"But I didn't! Darling——" She could feel the new tears come

into her eyes to magnify them, and then gently, heart-breakingly spill over to wet her cheeks. "You see . . ."

She let her voice trail away. She allowed him to bring out a handkerchief. His face was a curiously attractive mixture of irritation and tenderness as he dried her eyes for her.

"What do I see?" Now his voice was softer, almost playful. "Mmm?"

"I was a bit upset . . . when you turned off." She kept twisting her hands. "I thought . . . *Hugh, don't be cross —*"

"I'm not in the least —"

"Oh, I know it's silly, Hugh! But I really did think you didn't like me any more. No, don't say anything!" She gave him a damp smile. "You'd been so cross and . . . oh, *uncaring* . . . and it did seem . . ."

"What did it seem?" Now his tone was wholly gentle.

"That you wanted to . . . to be *rid* of me . . . and then I saw you'd gone, and I didn't know where. And I thought —" She held the back of her left hand against her forehead as though to steady the whirling of her mind. The gold link bracelet on her wrist tinkled in time to her trembling. "He doesn't even care enough about me . . . to know when I'm not *there*. And after that . . ." She paused a long time, then sweeping down on the crest of a huge sob: "I didn't much care if I *was* lost!"

"Joyce! Don't be so ridiculous!" But he was smiling. He tilted up her chin, and kissed her full on the mouth. A salty kiss it would be, she thought. She let her lips cling. She pressed her body against his, the trembling now turned into the warm soft curvings of her flesh.

"Mmm, darling!" She blinked her eyes and shook her head as though she was bedazzled. She laughed. "Darling, it was nearly worth getting lost to be kissed"—in a whisper—"like *that*!"

He slipped her arm through his. Again, they started to move forward. "I'm sorry, Joyce. All over now. I had something on my mind, that's all. Let's forget about it. Let's get this silk and then find a place to eat, and maybe dance. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Love it, Hugh!" She leaned nearer to him. "But I *can't* just *forget* things like you seem to be able to, sweet. You see,"

she said in a low voice, watching their two pairs of feet moving in time, "what *you* feel . . . well, means"—a pause—"so *much* to me." She stopped. Her head was lowered. She murmured to the ground. "*Everything!*"

"Here. This looks all right." He was pointing a little higher up the road to where an Arab in a little black cap was already beckoning. "Let's try it, anyway."

Inside it was cool and dark, soft with blurred shadows after the sharp etching of the sunlight outside. The still stale air was full of the dry oatmeal smell of bales of cloth, and the sweetish spicy perfume that clung to the velvet bags and slippers and handbags, stitched in, it seemed, along with the bright threads and the gilt and the sequins.

Joyce Mitchell screwed up her nose and shuddered fastidiously. She touched an ivory ornament, held up the tip of it, grey with dust. "Look, Hugh, filthy!"

Dallas shrugged his shoulders. He turned to the Arab, now eyeing them expectantly. "You have silk? Blue silk?"

There were nods and smiles and handwashings. Joyce giggled softly, wandering around, humming under her breath. She picked up a long piece of thin black nylon, and held it against herself. "Hugh, how do I look?"

Slip slop went the red slippers against fat heels as the owner came up with the bale of silk.

Dallas stared down at it. "Joyce," he said, "Come over here. You're meant to help."

She put down a tiny embroidered cap that she was setting with loving and exquisite care on her head. "Oh, must I, sweet?"

"Must."

She came slowly back, putting up her face to him as she passed, bunching her mouth into half a pout, half a kiss. "Brute!" she whispered. Then fingering the material, "Awful!" And to the Arab imperiously, "Take it away!"

Another piece was produced. "This vairy . . . vairy good . . . ten rupee."

Joyce yawned. "We-ell, I suppose it *might* do —"

At length, she settled for a bolt of nine-rupee stuff, putting her

finger on it with a pretty, exaggeratedly childish gesture, and saying, "I choose *that!*"

The Arab looked surprised, and then gratified. Dallas had a momentary suspicion that it was the least becoming of all the fabrics they'd been shown. But she was the expert, and it was, after all, no more than a suspicion.

He smiled at her, slipped his arm through hers, gave her a little pull towards him. She sighed contentedly. Together, while they waited for the silk to be cut and wrapped, they wandered around the shop, stirring the trays of ornaments with their fingers, Joyce slipping her hand through the heavy bracelets, trying on a ring, flashing it laughingly in front of his eyes.

She was trying her foot in a jewelled-heeled slipper, when he saw it. On a velvet tray in the corner near the window, almost hidden away under a pile of junk--a gold filigree Phoenix on a lady's brooch.

He went over to pick it up. The beak was beautifully done, turned to the left, the gold thread exquisitely fashioned and curved. One round eye regarded him beadily. The great wings were outstretched, ready for flight. He knew something of the history of that legendary bird, forebear of the huge jet aeroplane he flew. Always male, it lived for a thousand years. And then reproduced itself by setting fire to its nest: so that out of the smoke came another Phoenix to continue the eternal flying cycle.

He looked at the tiny label, hanging from the pin by a thread. Eighteen rupees. Cheap enough.

He began walking with it, holding it like a treasure in his hand. The girl was bending over a trayful of trinkets, fingering them lovingly. When she heard him, she looked round quickly, glancing at his face, as though expecting to be scolded.

"What have you got there?" she said, and when he didn't answer, she watched him as he sauntered over to the Arab, feeling in his pocket, bringing out his wallet. When he came back to her, she said nothing.

Her fear of him suddenly touched Dallas. Mindful of ungraciousness, his earlier unkindness, on an impulse he said, "Here, give me your hand." And when she held it out, frowning a little, he spread it out flat and dropped the brooch into the centre of her

palm and closed her fingers over it. "There," he said. "It's for you."

Pleasure flooded her face. "Darling! You absolute darling!" She made a little gesture of holding her clenched hand to her breast. "How sweet you are!"

She leaned forward and gave him a little breathless kiss on his cheek.

In the dark shadows of the shop, the Arab went on nodding and smiling and clasping his hands. Someone, a beggar probably, went by outside shouting in a sing-song mournful voice.

Very slowly, she uncurled her fingers. "Lovely!" she breathed. "Perfectly lovely!" She traced the outline of it with the forefinger of her free hand. "Beautifully done! *Quite* exquisite!" Her enthusiasm seemed far more than the worth of the brooch merited.

Dallas said gently, "D'you see what it is, Joyce?"

"Mmm. It's some kind of a bird. Now," she put her hand to her forehead, "let me see! A special sort of a bird. Oh, damn, what is it?"

"A Phoenix."

"But of course! How absolutely marvellous! How clever of you to find it. Hugh——" She began to pin it on her dress, just below the V of the neckline. "You couldn't have chosen anything I'd value more."

Obsequiously, they were bowed out of the shop. They started slowly walking up the road towards the station. Conscious that he had been kind, Dallas felt a sudden surge of warmth towards the girl.

"I feel . . ." Her voice had gone husky again. She touched her brooch with delicate, almost reverent fingers. "This is a rather *special* present."

"And now let's have a beer," he said. "I know a club we can go to. Damn . . . that was a taxi! Never mind! There'll be another one along in a minute."

**7** The evening had started all right. They had had two drinks at the club. Then Joyce knew just the place to dance. "Smallish, rather *intimate*, a bit crowded. But such fun!" she had said, tucking her hand into his in the taxi. "Guess who took me there first?"

"There isn't the time," Dallas said. "Give me a clue. Pilot? Fleet Superintendent? Steward? Rich man? Poor man? Beggar man? Thief?"

"I don't go around with all *those*!" she said softly. "For *obvious* reasons. But"—she took out her mirror and began to examine her face appreciatively—"I'll *tell* you." She brought out her lipstick, dabbed her lips, waved it in the air for greater effect. "It was Judd." She screwed the top back on and then tapped Dallas playfully on the chin with it. "There, *that* surprised you. Didn't it?"

"Yes." He half smiled. "As a matter of fact, it did."

"Jealous?" She leaned nearer to him, staring up wide eyed in the taxi's twilight. "Mmm . . . just a little?"

She had been in the highest spirits ever since he had given her the brooch. She kept touching it, pinned there rather incongruously in the fold of her slightly too décolleté neckline.

"No," Dallas said. "Ought I to be?"

"I don't know. He did seem quite . . . what shall I say?" She smoothed her skirt down over the lovely long line of her thighs. "*Interested*"

Dallas lit a cigarette and said nothing.

"During the evening, that was," she murmured primly. Then when he still said nothing, she sighed and said, "D'you like him, Hugh? D'you like Judd?"

"He's all right."

The taxi gave a sudden lurch round a corner. She dropped against him—soft, scented, silky. He gave her a quick automatic kiss.

"How *dull* men are!" she laughed. "He's all right. Judd's all right." She mimicked Dallas, giving him a demure apologetic glance afterwards. "Judd isn't all right to *me*." She put her



hands on her hips now, like Judd, lowering her head. "Judd's a brute. Judd's ruthless. Judd's no imagination. No conscience! No heart. He's a big charging bull of a man." She paused breathlessly. "Really rather attractive!"

Dallas laughed.

"Oh, I mean it. Not like *you*, of course." She took his arm and slid it round her waist. "You're all of those. But *you* have quite a lot of conscience and imagination. And . . ." She snuggled up closer to him. "A *tiny* bit of heart. Or have I got that now?"

Dallas just smiled.

She sat up suddenly and said, "Damn! That man drove like the wind. This is it!"

She put a proprietary dignified hand on his arm as they swept through the door, under the red and blue arch of lights, followed the Sikh waiter down the palm grove, out on to the tiled patio to a small secluded table.

"There, Hugh! Like it?" She eased her chair around beside him to get a better view of the tiny square floor, and rested her hand on his knee. "You know, oddly enough we sat quite near here when I came with Clive." She watched his reaction with almost clinical thoroughness.

In spite of himself, Dallas frowned. Joyce Mitchell smiled.

"But as you *are* a bit jealous, I'll let you into a secret. It was really business. He said, 'Miss Mitchell, *I want you tonight*.'" She gave a low husky laugh. "Am-biguous, wasn't it? Oh," she sighed, looking at Dallas, "Don't be prudish! He said, 'The President of Asian Airways and his wife are here tonight. We are going to entertain them.' Like that. Just like that." She shrugged her shoulders. "Great fun! Judd talked about the Phoenix the whole evening."

Judd, Phoenix, buying, selling, salesmanship, snags, take-offs, Gort, Robinson,—inextricably, like a suffocating web, the names wove themselves around Dallas' mind. Vaguely, beyond it, he was aware of Joyce Mitchell, of her voice, her face, her gestures.

Ever since that first crash, a part of his mind had been on it, waking or sleeping. As though something inside him had been detailed to remember it. But sometimes, like tonight, suddenly

coming out and taking charge of his brain. The inquiry had left too many things unsolved. Pilot error—sure. But why had Gort done it? Might he conceivably do it again? Might someone else do it?

To shake his thoughts off, he looked round the patio. A dozen faces, all like Robinson seemed to turn to him. What did the Ranjibad manager know about it? Excitable, like all chee-chees. Dallas scowled. He wouldn't really be sorry when Judd succeeded in getting rid of him. But then, when the Flight Captain got back from furthering the prospects of the Route, he might possibly—he was that sort—want to get rid of Gort, too.

He stood up and said brusquely, "Come on, Joyce. Let's dance."

It was a quickstep—brisk and bright. "Now I *know* you're jealous." She had laid her head humbly on his chest, while as though detached from the penitent Joyce, her warm body curved and twisted against his.

He held her a little away from him, "Jealous about *what*?"

"Clive Judd isn't *what*. He's human. *Just*."

"I haven't any feelings of any sort about Judd."

"Just because I say he gives me funny little shivers there—she put her arm suddenly around Dallas and ran her fingers provocatively up and down his spine—"when he orders us girls about. And that he makes me feel fragile and female, and . . ."  
She looked around to see if they were being watched. They were. She smiled happily. "*Earthy*," she whispered.

"Most men make you feel like that, don't they, Joyce?" He gave her a light cross shake. He was annoyed that she was pestering him toward awareness of her, annoyed that she was succeeding.

"Let's have another drink," he said, before the music had stopped. And she walked ahead of him back to the table, her head in the air.

But by the time they sat down, she seemed to have decided that she liked his reaction. When her Martini came, she stirred it, smiling sweetly, secretly, indulgently. "Look, that sweet waiter gave me *two* olives. Mmm. Lovely!" Her white teeth nibbled them greedily.

All around the room, men leaned against the wall, stood in groups, silently. The place was crowded with English, Dutch, Americans, Pakistanis, Anglo-Indians but the women were few and pale. Joyce's fresh English prettiness seemed to attract glances from all over the room. But except for an extra flush on her cheeks and an odd way of tossing back her hair behind her shoulders, she seemed unaware of it. They talked. They reminisced about their last trip together. They danced a waltz and a quickstep. But all the time, the conversation came harking back to the same subject.

Once, a younger, darker version of Robinson came over and asked her to dance. She glanced from him to Dallas with that queer long, oddly provocative glance, as if to say I'd love to, but he'd *kill* me.

"There," she said, when he'd gone, "the nerve of it! At least you can't be jealous of *him*!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Joyce," Dallas said, with sudden sharpness. "Stop being so damned silly! You can do what you want with whom you want. I'm not jealous of anyone."

She stared at him for a long time. Then she drew a deep breath. She lowered her head. When she looked up again, three silent minutes later, her eyes were swimming with tears. She touched her Phoenix brooch. Her fingers, very slightly, trembled.

He fought down an impulse to say he was sorry. He hadn't done anything to be sorry about. This obsession of hers was irritating. He drained his beer and ordered another. When the waiter reached for her glass, she covered it with her hand. "No," she said, innocently and piously—just, he thought furiously, as though he was trying to make her drunk. "Not for me, thank you, Hugh. I don't drink . . . much, you know."

When it was brought to him, Dallas stared down into his full glass. With her swizzle stick, Joyce made patterns on the table. They pretended to be enjoying listening to the music.

At last, the girl said, "Hugh . . . can I ask you something?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

"Is there . . . is there——" She gulped. "*Anyone else?*"

"Oh, Joyce, for God's sake, what d'you mean?"

"That you like? That you . . .?" She shot him a meaning

look from under her half-lowered lids. "Or some other girl that you're interested in. Lately."

"Lots. You know that."

"No. I don't *quite* mean that. You've been a bit different this trip, I can tell. Nice, and not nice. Warm and then cold. I'm not *used* to it! I don't like it! I *hate* it!"

"As I told you before, sometimes I like to *think*. Surprising eh?"

"I have an odd hunch," she went on as though he hadn't spoken. "Oh, I know girls you've been out with. And I know it hasn't meant much."

He gave a short unsmiling laugh. "Checking up, eh?"

"No. But don't forget I share a flat with Jennifer Brent." She inclined her head. "Girls talk."

"Apparently."

"But the other night"-- she spoke dreamily -- "at the theatre. *That* girl."

Surprised, Dallas said, "You mean the Gort girl?"

"She smiled at you in the foyer. And there was something in the way you *looked* at her."

"Really, Joyce, you get the most incredible ideas into your head!"

But he said it quite gently. He was smiling now, and that seemed to reassure her.

"You mean, you haven't taken her out?"

"Of course I haven't! I hardly know the girl. I've only met her once."

The blue eyes were watching his face carefully. "Oh."

"Satisfied?"

"Mm . . . maybe." And then suddenly, as though her mind was now at rest on the whole subject, she smiled back at him. "Yes, I am . . . I *am*!" She held up her glass. "And now I'll have another drink."

"Good!"

Peace was restored. The curious jangling tension between them seemed to have disappeared. After her drink was finished, Joyce closed her eyes, and sighed.

"Darling," she said, "it's been glorious fun . . . but let's go

back, eh? It's hot . . . and I don't want to dance any more."

She lolled her head against his shoulder. Her lips were parted, smiling, inviting.

Ten minutes later, in the taxi on the way to the hotel, she said, "The Gort girl didn't look your cup of tea, anyway. I should have known. Pretty, of course. But cold. Touch-me-nottish. An ice maiden."

"Not like you."

With pride: "No, not like me."

In the brightly lit hallway of the hotel, all was quiet and deserted. She took his hand up the wide stairway. She said in a low voice, "Going upstairs like this always makes me feel faintly improper."

"Does it?"

"Aren't you glad?"

At the door of her room, she said, "Come on in."

She gave him a sudden scornful look as he hesitated. And then, demurely: "Just for a drink . . . iced lemonade."

Once inside, she shut the door and leaned against it. "Aren't you going to kiss me, Hugh?"

He gave her one—a quick, rather impatient one.

"I'll get the drink."

She was a long time away in the bathroom. He wandered over to the window, and stared outside. Her room was at the back of the hotel. All along the horizon, under the hot black velvet night, the street-lamps of Ranjibad spread out before him. Away over to the east, not quite visible from here, would be the flarepath at the airport. Within the city, intermittently flared pink, green and yellow lights. Perched up like this, he thought, it was like the first few critical moments, just after take-off.

He heard her come in. She was carrying the jug of lemonade. She had taken off her dress. She was wearing only the flimsiest of negligées—red, ruffled round the neck, black tassels hanging from a silken cord round the middle of it. She made no effort to hide her naked body as she walked.

"Like it?" she said. "Not the same as our last trip." And then, eyebrows raised, half smiling. "Really, darling, one would think you'd never . . ."

She stopped. She put down the jug.

"Let's skip it, shall we?" he said. He began to walk to the door.

She caught hold of his arm. "Don't you want me any more? *Don't you?*" Now her face was contorted with real anger. He saw the indigo blue eyes go small, the lips forget to pout and become a thin dry line.

He said with a sudden quiet pity, "Not like that, Joyce. No."

He opened the door and went out.

He heard her slam it behind him. And then open it, and slam it again.

8 From where she had been waiting by the window, she watched him. The dark blue door of the crew car was open, and with a certain lugubrious dignity, he was getting out of the front seat. Three figures inside were saying goodbye to him. He touched his cap in semi-salute. The driver brought his suitcase from the boot at the back, and she saw him nod his head in gracious thanks. Then he turned, leaving the world of the sky and the Phoenix behind him, and came back to earth again, only to be immediately swallowed from her view by the waiting immaculate swish swing-doors of No. 2, Quiggan Square.

Charlotte had been giving a Saturday dust to his bedroom, had been flicking a yellow cloth along the old mahogany of the small wardrobe, and then over the row of books between the ebony elephants on the sill, when he had seen him there. Now, she watched the crew car wend its way out through the sharp apex of Quiggan Square, and after it too had disappeared, still she stayed where she was, staring out at the garden, the deserted pavements.

Remembering

From way back, from the very beginnings of her childhood, her father had been arriving or departing—in various places, all over the world: Bombay, Cairo, Khartoum, Colombo, two

years in South America, three in Montreal, wherever was decreed by the succession of Boards that had formed the private enterprise 'British Empire Airways. For Gort himself had never changed, only the administrators around him, most of whom made up for their own inability to fly by the vigour with which they fought each other for the privilege of telling such as George Gort what aircraft to pilot next and in what part of the sky.

As a result, Charlotte's schooling had been mixed, haphazard, bizarre. Bits of Hindustani—at table, they still called water *pani*—odd words of Spanish, French, Arabic floated in her mind, together with a many coloured mixture of fragments of memory: climbing through the thick wet vegetation to the peaks of foreign mountains: picnics by waterfalls and under tropical sunsets: dawn on the Andes: devil-dancers swaying under the banyan trees: the saffron of a Buddhist priest's robes: the flaming of a Quebec forest in the Fall: the sudden shock of finding a snake in the cupboard: tennis parties in the compounds outside Company bungalows: watching her mother dressing to go to some Governor's ball, receiving the eau-de-Cologne kiss and the *go-to-sleep-Charlotte* that preceded her own weird wanderings and fears and worries into the doings of the insects—the flies, the beetles, the bullfrogs, the spiders—outside her white mosquito net, whose movements often she could hear, but whose doings were always invisible. Against all that background, against the picture of their first family house in North London, against the sadness of her mother's death, against her leaving school, against her getting a job, first in a solicitor's office, then at Dr. Dawes, against her entertainments, her parties, even somehow her friends, swung the eternal pendulum of his comings and goings. And the saving grace, the one constant in her kaleidoscopic life was this same vision of her father in uniform resolutely setting off, and just as resolutely returning.

As she stood by the window, still motionless, she was glad in her heart that after the grim, disrupted condition of the period after the crash, the pattern had been resolved back again to this. There had been a time when her one aim was to get him off flying—and certainly off the Phoenix—for good. Till she found out his feelings, touched some of the foundations of his life

unexpectedly close to the surface, and then her main fear had been that he would be grounded.

And then came Monday, the second of July.

It had been in every other respect normal. At breakfast, he had eaten with the newspaper propped in front of him—as he always did, despite her repeated protests against it. He had said very little—and that, too, was usual enough—had passed his cup over wordlessly for his second cup of tea. The post had come: she had gone to collect it. There were three letters for him, which she had put by his plate; one for herself, from a boy she knew in the Navy, and she had opened it and was reading it, when suddenly out he exploded with: "Look, Charlotte, this is a bit thick! We can't have this sort of thing, you know!"

Looking up, she saw him furiously waving a bill. Silently she took it. Calmly, she said, "That's the bill for your new bedroom curtains. You agreed to them. What are you getting so steamed up about?"

"Eighteen pounds, eleven shillings and eightpence!"

"Well?"

"You told me the estimate was fifteen."

"And it's three pounds more."

"Three pounds, *eleven shillings and eightpence more!* They're overcharging, Charlotte! They think just because we've got a Mayfair address we're made of money!"

"They haven't overcharged. They asked me if I wanted a pelmet, and I said yes. That's what's extra."

"Then why didn't you tell me you'd ordered a pelmet?"

"You can't expect me to account for every penny I spend on the flat."

"Every penny! Three pounds, eleven shillings and eightpence can't be called a penny, Charlotte!"

"If I'm running this house, father, you'll have to let me——"

"No money sense, that's your trouble. Charlotte! You seem to think you just turn on a tap, and out it flows. Let me tell you——"

"Father . . . you'll be late at the airport if you don't hurry up."

Breakfast was finished in silence. Then he had stumped out to



the hall, and gone off without saying goodbye. With an effort, she quenched a number of unflattering adjectives suitable for him in his present frame of mind, as she finished off her tea quickly, and got up to clear away.

She was just reaching for his cup and plate, over the paper which had toppled sideways on the toast rack, when she caught sight of one of the smaller headlines: *Phoenix Inquiry: Pilot Blamed: Joint statement of complete confidence in the aircraft issued by manufacturers and British Empire Airways.*

And seeing it suddenly—then and only then it was too much: the crash, the long weeks of waiting, the Inquiry, the silly row about the curtains, now this. She dropped into his empty chair. She started sobbing with despair, while at the same time with her small clenched fists she hammered the table cloth, rattling the remains of this shattered breakfast in a frenzy of feminine fury against all of them—the lot—Empire Airways, Atlas Aviation, Manningham, the Commissioner and his assessors, that bumped-up know-all Dallas, Dr. Dawes, the boy in the Navy, the Phoenix, the government, the curtains and her father.

He had been much quieter when he came back that night, much more unreachable. For the next few days he took to staying up very late at night. His eyes became heavy with tiredness. He still went out to the airport to do his job promptly every morning; but he went listlessly. She did her best to help him, but that was difficult as the only subject which still seemed to interest him was the economics of her household management. He had brightened a bit after his Check; he was quite cheerful when he was back on the roster; but he had gone off on this trip, after fussing even more than usual about his personal appearance, after telling her that he “would show them”, in a mood of such sombre determination that it had made her heart ache.

For seven days she had worried. And now just the sight of him—exactly as he had always come back from a trip, looking the same, doing the same things in the same way that he had always done them ever since she could remember—was a relief and a reassurance, and she was smiling as she walked out of

the bedroom, out of the hall, out into the corridor outside to meet him as he came up round the corner of the stairs.

She put her arms round his neck, as he stood with his bag in one hand and his brief case in the other, and kissed him.

"Good trip?" she asked as they went arm in arm, through the open door of the flat.

"*Excellent*, Charlotte! Twelve hours ten minutes . . . Ranjibad to London. Good, eh?" He dumped his cases on the floor of the hall, and wiped his forehead. "Worst part was that blasted staircase!"

"Tired?"

"Not at all!"

He hung up his hat and coat, and walking on into his lounge, he rubbed his hands with pleasure at what he saw around him.

"Ah, but it's nice to be home!"

"You're brown anyway, father. Lots of sun?"

"Too much. Baking in Singapore."

"We could have done with a bit here. Been" - she shivered - "cold! Anyway, you sit down. I've got some tea all ready."

When she came back into the lounge, she found him lying back comfortably in the armchair, his arms stretched out, his eyes closed. He opened them when he heard the soft contact of the tray on the coconut wood table. "That looks nice!" He took the cup from her hands, stirred it with the Kandyan silver spoon. She sat down on a tuffet beside him, her hands in her lap.

"Yes, Charlotte," he said, sipping his tea, nibbling a biscuit. "One of those trips when you come back satisfied. On schedule all the way. Good crew. Know what the First Officer said?"

"No," she smiled. "What?"

"He said he'd never known anyone land a Phoenix as smoothly as I did. I was greasing them on, Charlotte . . . all down the route. Rome, Singapore . . . even a cross-wind night landing at Ranjibad."

Gort looked over his mail: a postcard from a fellow pilot and his wife holidaying in Sicily, a circular from a wine merchant's, two bills and three receipts.

"And the passengers . . . an excellent crowd! I had Lord

Branksome to Cairo. Took him up to the front and let him sit in the left-hand seat. We had quite a chat. Said to me . . . 'don't know how you chaps do it, don't really.' Charming man, Charlotte. Natural . . . absolutely natural."

He went on about his trip, interspersing his own comments with the First Officer's observations. Then he finished off his tea, and said, "What have you been doing while I've been away, Charlotte?"

She had her arms folded across her blue woollen jumper. "I went to a revue with Bill Tatchell on Saturday."

"Bill Tatchell?" He heard sometimes the names of her friends, tried to remember them. "Is that the doctor? The chap that helps Dawes? The one I met?"

She nodded.

"Seems a nice sort of chap, Charlotte. Good job. Secure job. Ask him around for a drink."

But the girl appeared not to have heard him. "And Captain Dallas phoned. He wanted us all to go to the theatre."

"Dallas? Hewas out on the route, but I missed him. Theatre, eh? Good heavens! Nice of him, though." He passed his cup over for more tea. "Did you go?"

"I couldn't. It was the same night I was going out with Bill."

"Oh, pity! Must give him a call. Have him along." He bit into another biscuit, comfortably, companionably. "Better make it soon, too. Before Friday. Friday . . . I'm out again on service." He took the full cup from her. "Anything else?"

She shook her head. "No . . . nothing. Same old routine at Dawes'. Same old patients. And now——" She stood up. "Bed for you!"

She was pleased as she walked back into his bedroom, drew the new curtains across the sun-filled windows, turned down the bed. It was obvious that he was so much more confident, so much more cheerful. Completely back to normal. The same as ever. Or—she began wondering about it as she walked back into the lounge—*almost* the same. •

She put her hands out and pulled him up. "Come on . . .

you're almost asleep already! I'll wake you at tea-time. That'll give you six hours."

"Thanks, Charlotte." He stood up and stretched, and she bent to pick up the tray. "An excellent trip! A very good trip indeed! The First Officer said . . . that's the best Phoenix trip I've done, sir!"

She was suddenly aware that his First Officer's buttery praise was so uncharacteristically important to him because of Lambourne, for whose death he was now held officially responsible. Tray in her hand, she smiled at him gently. "Who was he . . . this paragon of a First Officer?"

"Oh . . . a new chap called Joynson," he said.

And then amiably, off he went to bed--whistling softly.

Last light--the sweetest time of the day to fly, the hardest time of the day to land. There was no wind. The sun-streaked evening seemed to be slowing itself down, folding itself up, settling itself to sleep. As Braddock turned the Phoenix on to final approach ahead of them, the smoke from the factories round the Atlas works had mixed with the damp beginnings of night, and lay heavily in patches of opaque grey over the airfield, through which the tenuous runway lights blinked myopically. The curious other-worldliness of the air, the distorted exaggeration of shadows, the heady atmosphere itself, so still and so secretive, robbed the sky of all height or depth or breadth, and its very mildness became light-headed, deceptive: dangerous. Braddock screwed up his eyes, felt for the trim, pushed the nose gradually forward, and descended towards the five muzzy green blobs just beyond the railway line that marked the threshold of the runway.

"8000 r.p.m.!"

Dallas, sitting beside the Australian, obediently eased the throttles back for him, heard the hum of the jets go lower. This man was all right. Only on his third training trip, already this man knew what he was doing. The Training Captain's mind was only half on the approach, as the Phoenix slipped slowly lower: the other half was occupied for the moment with

remembering his own landings on the trip round the Route, from which he had only returned three days ago.

"7000 r.p.m.!"

Operationally, it had been a success. He did not very often go on the Route, and he had enjoyed himself. He had succeeded in relegating Mr. Robinson and his remarks to a lower position in his conscious mind, and Miss Joyce Mitchell's cool behaviour after the incident at Ranjibad had not disturbed him. He had already some experience of withdrawing from female friendships, and hoity-toitiness on the girl's part he had always found made it very much easier. On the ground, she always spoke to him too politely. In the air, she seemed unaware that he was on the aeroplane, but all the same she was careful that he should always find her *doing* something, whenever he entered the cabin: talking to old lady passengers, telling stories to little children, arranging rugs and cushions, bringing magazines, dispensing tea and coffee, producing drinks, sandwiches, six-course meals. Dallas saw that she had pinned the Phoenix brooch to her shirt, perhaps as a reproach to him - but to comply with Company regulations about wearing of jewellery on duty, it was decently covered by the lapel of her monkey-jacket. Company regulations also decreed that the back of a stewardess' hair should terminate  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches above the top of her collar, and Dallas had a sudden overwhelming itch to whip out a ruler and measure it then and there to satisfy a private conviction that the gap between bright white and chestnut brown was  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches to a micro-millimetre.

"6000 r.p.m.!"

They were coming up to the railway line now - height 500 feet, nicely positioned for landing. Speed 135 knots.

Dallas shifted all his attention, now they were lower, on to the job in hand. Critically, he watched the Australian's movements on the controls.

Braddock was slowing the Phoenix up. He called for flap. He flared out, just over the hedge. The jets hushed. The tyres brushed the runway.

"Not bad," Dallas said abruptly. "You're getting the idea."

They taxied to the ramp. Normally speaking, after the

engines had been shut down, he would have had a word or two, maybe a cigarette, with the Australian. But he felt tired to-night. As soon as he'd signed the book, he said good night, and walked off by himself to the main buildings, up the stairs to the second floor.

Coming along the corridor, he saw light rimming the door of his office. It would probably be Pickering, he thought. He was about the only person in Atlas who ever came to see him. At this time of day, especially.

He got hold of the handle. He turned it. He was conscious at first of the last pink stain of evening, coming into the room through the window.

And then at the desk, he saw Judd.

Under the electric light, his yellow head had a brassy sheen to it. His long chin was in both his hands. From under eyebrows so far as to be almost invisible, eyes like grey beads gave Dallas a long staring welcome.

He raised his hand in salute. "Hugh."

"Hello, Clive."

"Long time no see . . . as the Chinaman said to the mermaid." He threw back his head and laughed. That was one of Judd's habits, this producing unintelligible jokes, and then laughing over them. And the laughter always lasted too long. The first *ha-ha* was unforced and almost infectious, but any noise that followed was just a mocking echo. There it was now: a cracked bell sound that went on and on, till Dallas silenced it with: "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday." Judd had got up from the seat, and now had his arms folded, the front of his flannelled thighs leaning lightly against the side of the desk.

"Bateson brought me. Nice pilot. Nice pair of hands on Bateson."

The voice had a Cornish burr to it: the *rs* not rolling, but muffled, almost soft. And behind it was a very slight lilt—relic of a childhood in Selangi, where the family wealth was in tobacco plantations.

Dallas flung his brief-case on the top of the desk, and sat down in the seat. "Route to Sydney all organized?"

"Pretty well."

"Managed to get a trip in myself."

"So I heard."

Dallas began filling in the details of his training flight in the book. Judd lit a cigarette. "Been doing the new chap?"

"Yes."

"Braddock . . . that's his name, isn't it? All right?"

"Yes."

"How old?"

"Mid-thirties."

"Good!" Judd flicked an infinitesimal amount of ash into the tin on the desk with elaborate unconcern. "Had to see Pickering . . . so while I was here, thought I'd drop in for a chat."

Dallas said politely, "Glad you did."

"Pickering's been bringing me into the picture."

"The picture?"

"Of what's been happening while I've been away."

"Oh, I see."

"He's upset."

"Pickering? Yes. . . . I know."

"Pity." Judd let out a sigh with an exhalation of blue smoke.

"We've always got on so well with Atlas."

"He'll get over it."

"How d'you know?"

"Because he's always got over it before."

"This is different."

"Why?"

"He thinks a mistake . . . a terrible mistake has been made."

"Does he?"

There was a pause. A car belonging to a late worker started in the car park outside, revved up a little, moved off. Then Judd said: "And so do I."

Dallas said nothing. With deliberate slowness, he went on finishing his report on the day's training. He had expected Judd to object to Gort going back on the Route; and he had expected the objection to take the form of a growl of displeasure that his "young" jet fleet had again been invaded by

this hoary, red-faced veteran. But now Judd's manner, as he stood with his arms folded by the side of the desk, implied that this time the matter was not going to be allowed to remain at the grumbling level.

There had already been some clashes between them. Mild ones. The competence of the pilots Dallas had passed on to the Route—not even Gort, the first time—had never before been questioned. Sensing the imminence of a rather less mild clash than usual, Dallas bided his time.

"You realize what I'm driving at, Hugh?" Restless from waiting, Judd's arms had unfolded themselves. They were straight in front of his body now. Out of the corner of his left eye, Dallas saw the hands—rather white hands they were—resting on the top of the desk, the fingers just tapping the polished oak surface.

"Hang on, Clive. I'll be with you in a minute." He closed the training book, put it carefully over in the opposite corner to Judd. "Yes," he said. "I know what you're driving at. Gort."

"Gort . . . yes."

"No mistake there." He screwed on the green mottled top of his fountain pen. "I threw the Book at Gort. And he threw it back at me . . . word perfect!"

"And now he's on the Phoenix Route!"

Dallas nodded. "Done one trip, too. Nothing went wrong. What are you worried about?"

"The Route's my pigeon."

"And making sure the Route gets competent pilots is *my* pigeon."

"And Manningham's pigeon—Judd leaned further over the desk—"in this instance was to get rid of Gort on to another fleet without any fuss!"

"I don't agree," Dallas said slowly. "He rang up the Operations Director. He was told the Board knew they could rely on him to do 'the wise thing'."

"Quite! That's what he's paid for!"

"If the Board wanted to get rid of Gort, why didn't they do it themselves?"



"You know as well as I do, Hugh, the President likes to leave things to the fleets as much as possible."

Dallas remembered the only time he had met his new chief without enthusiasm. "I know he likes passing the buck when it comes to doing anything unpleasant."

"That's unfair." Judd's face had gone slightly pinker. "He's feeling his feet."

"I'll take your word for that," Dallas said drily. "If anyone on the Fleet should know such little personal details about the man . . . it's you."

Judd smiled, but he said nothing. He stubbed out his cigarette. "For a pilot," he said, "Gort's quite well known. Good record. Long one too. Can be very determined. If he and the President had a row——" Judd made a siphoning sound with his lips. "Nasty!"

Moving away from the desk, Judd put his hands in his pockets and walked over to the window. "After all, the Board did their share of disciplining Gort. It was up to Manningham to do *his* share."

Dallas said nothing.

"He always wanted older pilots on the Phoenix." Judd went on staring out at the lights on the London road, blazing away in the darkness. "He's had a crash himself. And he's a friend of Gort's."

Dallas still said nothing.

"Can't understand a sensible character like you, Hugh, getting landed like this."

Judd spoke softly. Getting no response from the window, he had moved over to the blackboard on which was chalked the names of the twelve Phoenix captains in white, and in red the due date for their next 180-day Check. "I suppose you didn't realise what you were letting yourself in for. Possible consequences." He paused. "Gort." He put his finger on the name. "January 3rd! God . . . he's loose for another five months!"

Dallas said, "Look, Judd . . . that's my business."

"Only trying to help." Judd shrugged his shoulders. "And what I'd suggest——" Judd had come back to the desk again. "You can't check *everything* in a two-hour period."

"I don't try."

"An emergency, after an explosive decompression . . . did you check Gort on that?"

"No."

"Well then—*easy*! Say you forgot it. Take him up again."

"And when he does it all right?"

"That's just it." Judd smiled. "You can either say he's come down too fast and he'd have broken up in turbulence. Or he's come down too slowly and all his passengers would have been asphyxiated."

"And then?"

"You can fail him "

"I can *what*?"

"Fail him "

Dallas slowly put down the papers in his hand. "Deliberately fail someone? Is that what you mean? Is it?"

Judd shrugged his shoulders. "No need to put it like that. But you've got the general idea."

"What d'you think I am?"

"A good Phoenix Training captain."

Dallas folded his arms across his chest. "Like hell you do! If you come up with that!" He kept his head slightly down, his light eyes upturned unblinkingly on Judd's face.

"Now you're being naive." The colour was coming up under Judd's fair skin. "Sometimes . . . these things have to be done."

"*What* things? Cooked Checks?" Almost gently, Dallas said, "You take a pride in your job." He paused. "Oddly enough, I do in mine."

Judd said bitterly, "Oh, for God's sake come off it! My job! Your job! Don't be such a bloody little cog in a machine! Take the long view. Not just your own."

They were facing each other now, so that the desk lamp threw huge long-nosed caricatures of them on the wall behind: black, quivering, ragged-edged, moving towards one another and away again like candle-flame shadows.

"Look, Hugh, you've had sweet fanny adams experience of anything but flying. You don't know how it's done, I tell you! If this was——"

"Selangi. I know. You've told me before. Many times."

"Not enough times, by God! You don't learn. I'm glad my father knew how to run things. That's why he was able to buy up a lot of silly sods with ideas like yours."

"But even he, I take it," Dallas said distinctly, "didn't practise fraud. Or did he?"

"Now you're being just bloody rude! Bloody offensive! What the hell are you getting at?"

"That's what you're suggesting I do, isn't it?"

Judd sucked in his lips and pushed them out again. "You've got it all wrong," he said. "Now you're going to the other extreme. All I'm saying is that *someone* has to go for the good of the rest. Gort's got to go. Everybody says so. Atlas Aviation——"

"I suppose you agreed with everything Pickering——"

"You're wrong again! This is an Empire Airways affair, and I said nothing. Either way. But I can't help wondering what Atlas would think . . . after the years they've spent perfecting the Phoenix . . . if they could hear us having this row over an incompetent pilot. In their own factory, too!"

"Gort's perfectly competent."

"He's not good enough for the Phoenix route."

"One thing," Dallas said drily, "I *have* seen outside flying is this gauleiter stuff. And you know what you can do with it. You can indulge your fancies for life in the raw in Selangi. But you're not there now . . . more's the bloody pity."

Judd gave a sudden unexpected laugh. "A good job for the Phoenix Fleet I'm not!" He walked back to the window and began to whistle. Behind him, Dallas bent over a file.

Imperceptibly, the atmosphere quietened, like dust slowly sifting down and settling in a room.

Neither of them said anything till Judd, as though suddenly he'd made up his mind, came over to the desk and in quite a different tone of voice said, "Well . . . that's that! I've said my say. All right?" He smiled down at Dallas disarmingly. "Eh?"

Dallas looked up, half smiled in return, and nodded.

"You seem busy." Judd got out a cigarette and lit it. "This

bloody paper work! Drives you round the bend doesn't it?" He looked sympathetic. "Got your car?" And when Dallas nodded, "I was going to offer you a lift." He glanced at his watch. "Late, by God! I better be getting mobile. Don't overwork, now." He grinned boyishly. "They won't pay you any more." He began to walk towards the door. "Be seeing you. Good night."

"Good night."

Judd had his long white fingers on the handle, when he stopped and turned. "Oh, by the way, Hugh," he said "Flying back with Bateson gave me an idea. You know other Companies have Route Inspectors?"

"I'd heard they had . . . yes."

"That's what we're going to have. See the boys are flying according to the Book. I mean, pilots like . . . well, Gort . . . and the rest might do all right on a training trip, but down the Route-----

Dallas said coldly, "Until I've got another instructor, I haven't the time."

The door made a slight scraping noise against the imoleum as it opened. "Wouldn't dream of bothering you, Hugh. Wouldn't dream of bothering anybody. I shall do the Route Checking . . . myself"

9 It was noon: high noon in Ranjibad, and the sun blazed. Everything steamed, even the grass, brown and dry though it was. Rising, the air oscillated dizzily from side to side. On the sticky tarmac outside Operations, Captain Gort and Mr. Robinson stood side by side, shielding their eyes with their hands\*as they stared up into the sky.

Gort's face, sandwiched between the thick serge jacket and the blue uniform cap, was redder than ever and streaming with sweat. Poking out of his white suit, and crowned by a white topi, Mr. Robinson's still looked cool and fawn. But his eyes were screwed up in a most unhappy way. The incoming

east-bound Phoenix was late. Three-quarters of his boarding passengers had departed on other Lines, trickling through his fingers as the hours of delay mounted. Now only eight remained.

"We can't have this, you know." Captain Gort's tone was severe. He had had a good trip out. He was impatient to be off. "Not on the Phoenix Route!"

*The Phoenix Route*—the Station Manager sighed the words under his breath. It seemed to him that he was also being blamed for this cabin supercharger that had gone wrong in Rome. As usual. Ever since the jets started six months ago, there had been nothing but trouble, though he'd done his best. Not so much the aircraft—this sort of delay was unusual—as the crews and their attitude: as high-handed as the altitude they flew. Nothing in this world was good enough for them. And the way they were always grumbling——

They were grumbling now. Not just Captain Gort. Behind the two of them, through the open window of the Operations Room, where the flight plan to Calcutta was being prepared, above the ineffectual squeaking of the fan, he could hear Gort's crew muttering to themselves about not being allowed to wear their khaki lightweight tropical uniform.

"You'd think the old bastard at least'd let us take our jackets off!"

Quickly and apprehensively, Mr. Robinson shifted his brown eyes from the heavens to Captain Gort's face. The words had come floating through the thin air with the tinkle-bell clarity of the navigator's petulant voice. But the Captain's expression only showed utter preoccupation with the annoying emptiness above him. His ears were reserved for something else: the shrill whistling of jets.

Suddenly, Gort threw back his head even further. He called out, "Ah . . . here's Victor Mike now!" A smile of pleasure turned up the corners of his lips. "Mr. Robinson, what a sight . . . what a sight!"

Coming out of the west, a sudden silver streak against that hard blue sky, wing-tips trailing long straight strings of white, victoriously beautiful, effortless for all its speed, the Phoenix flashed over the airfield, turned to gold in the sun on a long

slow turn to port: and now descending, wheeled round in a circuit to slow up, and then came gliding—flaps out, gear down—gracefully to earth.

And after landing, as though on the ground, too, the Phoenix must go twice as fast as any other aircraft, taxi-ing at a high racing speed, it came whistling up to the place where a marshaller was proudly holding up his outstretched brown hands on the Ramp. There—stopped, silent—the cynosure of all eyes in the crowded public enclosure, it was attended by a swarm of white-overalled men, eager to serve it, two petrol bowlers, a cool air truck, and some brand new hydraulically-operated, white painted steps. As the passengers emerged, Mr. Robinson and two of his traffic staff hurried forward to receive them.

An Empire Airways' Tourist Astroliner landed while the welcome was going on, its presence not fêted by vapour trails, its dull metal skin unvarnished by the sunlight. It parked itself slightly to one side of the jet-liner, stopped its piston engines, opened up its main door to an old pair of steps and a single Pakistani.

The Captain of the incoming Phoenix was also in blue serge uniform. A rather small man called Bateson with a chunky face and bright black eyes and an assured walk, he came strolling up to Gort, wiping his face. "God, it's hot!"

"It is a little warm."

Bateson put his handkerchief back in his pocket. "What sort of slip have you had?"

"Very pleasant."

"Christ . . . how I hate Ranjibad!" Bateson said morosely. "Got two days here on my way back, damn it!"

"Good trip?" Gort asked.

"Not too bad. Sorry about the delay."

"The aircraft's all right now, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes!" Bateson paused. "But by the way . . . get your First Officer to keep an eye on Number Four."

Gort said suspiciously, "What's the matter with Number Four?"

"Compressor revs high on take-off."

Gort put his hand up to stroke his chin. "How much?"

"Oh . . . very little. Thought I'd just tell you though."

"Thank you."

"Otherwise . . . perfect!"

In the ensuing lull in the conversation, the face of Gort's navigator—mulberry-coloured and cross—made a momentary appearance at the open window of the Operations Room to say shortly: "Flight plan's ready for signing, Captain."

Catching sight of him, Bateson laughed. "God, George . . . your navigator looks cooked to a turn! What's the idea?"

"The idea?"

"Your serge. Your blue serge. I mean, it's got to be worn leaving England. But everywhere past the first slip ---"

Putting his head closer to the other captain's, Gort said in a low voice, "By mistake . . . my First Officer left his khaki at home."

"Idiot!"

"And you know what the Book says about the crew all being dressed alike——"

"So what?"

"So we all stayed in blue, you see. Didn't want to let him down."

Bateson said in an astonished voice: "George . . . d'you mean you're flying all the way to Singapore in blue serge? Through the monsoon?"

"Certainly!"

"Hell in the cockpit . . . I tell you! See my back . . . it's wet! Feel it!"

"In the cockpit . . . out of the public eye," Gort pointed out, "of course we'll be able to take our jackets off."

"Sooner you than me." Bateson shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway, George"—for the same red face had appeared at the window—"you better go sign your flight plan before your navigator catches fire!"

Fifteen minutes later, the passengers—minus thirty-three disembarking, but plus Mr. Robinson's eight—were on board, refreshed by iced lemonade, and by cold air pumped into their cabin from the truck. Gort and crew had disappeared into the cockpit.

Now everybody outside again stopped to watch. People

from the public enclosure had trespassed on to the Ramp to take photographs. Even the two pilots from the Astroliner, coming out of Operations, stood still to look at the départure. Only Bateson's crew, used to such scenes, tired after their 4000-mile trip, had gone off in the car to the Imperial Hotel.

A great burst of grey smoke came out of Number Three engine with a report like cannon fire, followed almost immediately afterwards by its twin on the same wing.

When all four jets were started, and the chocks had been pulled away there was a momentary vision of Gort's fiery face as he started to taxi forward. The Phoenix moved round the perimeter track, and lined up at the end of the east-west runway.

There was over everybody watching a quietness now. A nostalgic, hypnotic quality. That same power exerted by anything going away—a ship, a train, even a car—emanated from that silver shape, waiting to take-off.

All noise was hushed. With the throttles right back, the aircraft seemed to be holding its breath in the hot stillness.

And then suddenly, with a shattering roar, the four engines opened up together. A whirlwind of smoke and dust streamed up to the sky behind them.

The Phoenix rolled.

Standing close to the Astroliner crew, Mr. Robinson watched. On and on the Phoenix pounded, all the jets screaming at full power. Up went the nose-wheel off the ground. The main tyres were kicking up great dry wakes of sand.

Then the aircraft, still on the ground, went plunging into a slight dip in the runway.

Now only the silver back of the fuselage was visible.

All at once, Mr. Robinson heard the Astroliner captain mutter to his first officer: "Jesus Christ . . . he's not going to get it off!" He saw the pilot start to move forward.

And then easily, an utter and immediate repudiation, the Phoenix rose into the air, tucked up its wheels, and in a great sweep of a climbing turn that provoked exclamations of wonder and admiration from the crowd, left the airfield to set course for Calcutta.



As the noise of the jets died away into the distance, the Astro-liner captain came back to his first officer a little pinker, and said, as though in excuse: "Never knew the Phoenix had such a long take-off run! The hot temperature, I suppose."

Then catching sight of the Station Manager, he called out half humorously, half bitterly: "Mr. Robinson, now you've got rid of royalty . . . do you think you can spare us a moment?"

To the east, the horizon was burned brown—an exact reflection, Gort thought to himself, as he studied it through the windscreen, of the baked mud of the countryside that crawled more than seven miles below. He had first caught sight of it a quarter of an hour ago, when it had just been a sharp arrow-head piercing a foamy mass of white cloud, pointing due south. Now, suddenly enormous, it filled its own quarter of the sky completely, and trailed across their track.

He moved his feet up and down on the rudders, just touching the pedals with the tips of his toes, to get some circulation back into his legs, and said to the First Officer beside him, "Looks like a squall."

"Aren't the brown ones supposed to be dangerous, sir?"

"Dangerous?" He thought for a moment, watching the dark mass ahead, remembering the colour order of cloud wickedness: white ones, grey ones, black ones, brown ones.

"They're the worst . . . certainly," he said. "Terrific up-currents. Tear our wings off"—he glanced at the air-speed indicator—"at this speed. No need to go into them . . . though. Those brown ones are always small."

The Phoenix, whistling unconcerned, sped towards the dark brown mass ahead.

"But at night?" the First Officer persisted.

"Oh, you get some warning. They don't usually go to this height. Anyway, the squall part is really quite low." He smiled. "I went under one once. 300 feet. In an old Handley Page. Thought I was swimming!"

"But you were going much slower, sir!"

"Oh yes . . . don't think I recommend it. Had to, on that

occasion. It was a long time ago. Met weren't so good at forecasting then."

"But they didn't forecast this one, sir!"

"Didn't . . . did they? Ah well——" He yawned and stretched. "We don't want to get any nearer to it, do we?"

He took out the automatic pilot and turned the aircraft sixty degrees to starboard. "It'll fizzle out near the sea. I've seen a good many of them. These sort always do."

Now that the squall was on the port beam, he allowed his eyes to look downwards. There below him—he recognised it at once, although it was so tiny—was the village of Akmera, its irregular shaped waterpool, its curious white temple, stuck like a hub in the centre of dark palm-covered mud huts.

It was the same all down this India route, he could recognise where he was without maps straight away, he had stared at this same unchanging earth so long. At 1000 feet or so above the ground and at 90 miles an hour, from the green lush round Calcutta over the red mud, the brown mud, the grey mud to the yellow sand of Ranjibad and back again, he had done the trip so many times, he felt himself somehow part of that up-and-down line: part of the bright sky, part of the dust-devils, part of the rain-cloud that hung perpetually during the monsoon months over the Bay of Bengal, part of the storms that boiled in the weird cauldrons formed by the mountains of Nepal, part even of Everest, which he had seen for the first time on his last trip, three hundred miles to the north—the highest mountain in the world, yet miles below the Phoenix. The fact that he had flown over this route so slowly, just above it: and now in this sleek silver marvel flew so high and so fast gave him immense satisfaction, made him feel an instrument in Somebody's great scheme. At the start of his career, the airmails from the East took nearly a fortnight: now they took less than a day. That wasn't a fact to fatten a history book. That was a fabric of lives, thousands of threads, sewn mysteriously one into the other.

And one of those individual threads was George Gort.

He took off his oxygen mask; got out of his seat; stood in the narrow aisle; said to the First Officer. "Just going aft to

fix the alteration of track. Then I shall do my round of the passengers. All right?"

"Fine, sir." Over his face, the First Officer fastened the oxygen mask that was a regulation for the pilot on duty, and put up his thumb.

But Gort did not move straight away. He still stood there, his hands in his pockets, his eyes travelling over the round faces of the instruments, listening to the whining of the jets. Then, satisfied, he lifted his jacket off the back of his seat, and buttoned himself up in it, before walking the three steps to the navigator's position.

He put his elbow down on the table, held his chin on his fist. He took a pencil, made two small crosses four or five inches apart on the chart, measured the exact distance between them with dividers -- a dog leg towards the Bay of Bengal, away from the brown darkness to port.

"We'll go that way," he said. "A hundred miles further . . . but the only way round. Tell the R O to get clearance, eh? I'm just going aft."

And stretching again, he put on his cap, turned the knob of the door in front of him, and went into the passenger cabin -- smiling.

His fifty-four charges arranged in front of him raised up their eyes from papers, away from portholes, to look at him. On the starboard side of the aircraft, in his domain in the centre section, the steward was busy bending over some arithmetical calculation connected with the bar takings, but the stewardess, drying dishes, peeped out of the galley, watching Gort, the towel stilled now round the rim of a sherry glass.

He talked to each one of the passengers. Each one of them was his guest. Each one of them, if they did but know it, had achieved already a certain immortality within him. For Gort kept a kind of scrap-book of all his trips, from the time when he first became a captain, in which he carefully copied out, not only the names of his crews, but also the names of the passengers he carried, and when he could get them, their ages and occupations. He would ask what they were flying to do. A big business deal? A diplomatic mission? An entertaining troupe?

Returning from school? Pure pleasure? Joining a ship? Posted to an oil company? Flying home to retirement? For in all these separate human aims and endeavours, he felt himself and his aeroplane involved, and he would frequently make a note (starred) against this name or that: so that sometimes, years later, he would both startle and delight an individual passenger by recalling not only his name, but what he was about, the last time they had met, face to face in the air.

Now, he was pointing through the porthole. It was that brown cloud again. Three or four passengers were clustered round, watching this phenomenon of nature, listening to what their Commander was saying about it. Then someone, admiring, was complimenting him on the lack of vibration, the sweet sing of the jets, the smooth ride he was giving them.

"And what speed are we doing, Captain?"

"Five hundred and" - he included the tail wind to increase their enjoyment of wonder. "sixty miles an hour."

"We'll be at Calcutta almost before we've left Ranjibad! One of these days . . . we'll be faster than time!"

"You must be very proud of your wonderful aeroplane, Captain!" Here was a lady not so very old, who'd ridden the London streets, Gort could guarantee, on a horse-drawn bus.

"Yes, madam . . . we're all proud of him."

"Him? *Him* . . . Captain?" said a pretty girl sitting with a hunk of husband beside her. "Aren't aeroplanes like ships . . . always *she's*?"

Gort gave her his best smile. "I'm sorry . . . but there never was a female Phoenix."

"Oh what a shame! How unfair!" And sideways, trying out the power of her eyes again, even though she was married, even though he was rather old. "Isn't that typical of men!"

"Don't blame us, madam," Gort said, enjoying this slight brush of opposite-poled swords. "We didn't invent the legend!"

With a smiling shrug of his shoulders, he moved on down the cabin. He had something to say to two schoolboys: a short talk on the British Empire to Lord Rycroft; a chat on tea to two brick-red young planters.

The steward, finishing his arithmetic, urged on the stewardess:

"Come on! Come on! Don't take all day . . . drying a sherry glass! Work to be done! Got to get moving!"

The trip for Jennifer Brent had so far been somewhat dull. At the hotel, at the meal table, there he was—a stopper to all natural conversation—and even when he was absent, more often than not he was the subject, as the talk got round to the Inquiry and its result. She finished drying the glass, and took up another, and said, "You'd think he was their king come down amongst them!"

The steward put away his bar book, and looked at Gort in action through the half-open hatch. "Mm," he said. "I wonder if any of them know?"

He lay back in the chair, a pad on his lap, writing to his daughter.

—the aircraft came in nearly twelve hours late to Ranjibad, and it was pretty warm, I can tell you, when we got out to the airport! To make matters worse, by an oversight, the First Officer had left his lightweight uniform at home! The poor chap was very upset. I knew how he must feel, because I once left my passport behind, and Customs at Cairo wouldn't let me through, so I had to spend the night on the aircraft! Anyway, this time we got round the difficulty by all wearing our blue, so that was all right. The rest of the crew were very decent. Teased him, of course. Joked, but never complained, though the temperature at Calcutta was 102 in the shade! They're an extraordinary good lot, Charlotte. A really splendid bunch! Keen, like all Phoenix crews are. Very, very smart, and you feel that with each of them, their jobs are a vocation. Even the steward and the stewardess serve the passengers and us as though it was their delight to do so.

All this is very heartening, as you can imagine. I had a feeling when I came back to the Line that perhaps—after all, they are so much younger—I might not be welcomed. I could not have been more wrong. Like my last crew, these

four chaps and the girl are very easy to talk to, and there is always bright, friendly conversation at meals.

Though we took off so late, we had tail wind help and were just catching up a bit when I saw a line squall ahead. This one looked very impressive, I can tell you! But for all that I knew it would peter out. I've seen so many of them hanging about the Mukkwatt hills at this time of year. So we dog-legged it towards the Bay of Bengal to Calcutta.

Great excitement there! Apparently we were the only aircraft in. All the others hadn't liked the look of the weather and had diverted to Allahabad. We got a record turn round (twenty minutes, and we took on 5000 gallons of kerosine!), and tonight we were the only eastbound aircraft to reach Singapore for the last twenty-four hours. So in spite of being so late, our passengers were delighted!

I am writing this on the verandah after a late dinner. Nobody else is around. I can hear the sea, not two hundred yards away at the bottom of the hotel garden, but it is quite black outside, and I can only see a few dark bushes and the trunk of a palm tree. However, there is a cool breeze coming off it, and that is nice.

Don't forget what I told you about not ordering fresh fruit or tea this week. Don't buy any rice either. Or any chutney. I shall have a two-day stop-over at Ranjibad coming home, and I shall get all we want. The best tea is only 3 - a pound there. Bananas and oranges are very cheap. Coffee, too, is reasonable.

I am just off to bed, so I won't write any more. I shall give this letter to Captain Creighton who is just in front of me, when I hand over the aircraft at Ranjibad tomorrow (Monday) night and I shall ask him if he would be kind enough to post it on to you.

I am very tired, Charlotte. But I am very content, too. And to feel those two - tired and content - both at the same time is, I think, the best reward I could want anyone ever to give to me . . .

IO Manningham picked up the envelope, recognised the elaborate *décor*, made a rueful grimace, and put it to one side till he had finished the rest of his Monday morning's mail.

It was one of the President's Thunderbolts.

Zeus on Mount Olympus and the newly made President of British Empire Airways in Head Office had both hit on the best possible method for preserving the amount of undisturbed privacy their busyness demanded. They kept themselves remote, unapproachable except by specially selected messengers who came, reported, received orders, and departed. In Empire Airways, though these messengers included all the senior H.Q. officers, they were not by any means always the Superintendents. The position, in any case, was not permanent and pensionable, but one that could be lost or found in a flash of Greek lightning, as Manningham had already discovered three months before when as a messenger, he had been replaced by Judd. Quite why was never revealed: but Manningham had a private conviction that it had to do with his pointing out the unpleasant fact of the consequences, after an explosive decompression in the Phoenix at altitude, of the crew having masks and an oxygen supply and the passengers having nothing. Not only did this device give the President the privacy—the freedom from irritating phone calls and faces—that he desired. It also cast over him an aura of fairness and justice, because by it he made sure that never did he personally have to do anything unfair or unjust to anybody.

His Thunderbolts, however, as his reinforcements to the persuasive power of his messengers were known, invariably lived up to their name, and an hour later, after he had cleared the *In* tray into the *Out* tray, there was a genuinely worried look on Manningham's face as he slit open the envelope.

He read:

Dear Manningham,

"When new to my position some six months ago, I was assured by my predecessor that I might place the utmost con-

fidence in the good sense of my Fleet Superintendents. I am wondering now if I have been, after all, so well informed.

A most disturbing state of affairs involving the Phoenix Fleet has been brought to my notice by Captain Judd.

We will, if you please, take our minds back to the regrettable accident at Ranjibad, to the subsequent Inquiry, and the blaming of the pilot in question. It was, as a result, the Board's unpleasant and difficult duty to discipline the captain involved.

Following my policy of decentralisation and democratisation in the company, to you was left the considerably lighter duty of deciding his future disposal. This, after all, was primarily a Fleet matter, and your decision would naturally be made in the light of a number of factors.

I can readily understand that you would consider the pilot's experience, and the fact that through a number of V.I.P. flights he had become fairly well known to the public.

However, you have gone too far in the one direction. In giving perhaps too much weight to the possibility of unwanted publicity, you have lost sight of the effect on our very good friends and allies Atlas Aviation. By retaining a pilot on the Phoenix Fleet in whom they have lost confidence, you have engendered a feeling of distrust and disappointment: a feeling I cannot for very obvious reasons allow to continue much longer.

The Phoenix Fleet is our star Fleet. In future, to guard against human error being allowed to creep in, a Route Checking system of the pilots will commence as soon as Captain Judd has completed his business commitments over here.

For the present, as far as the matter in hand is concerned, I understand that the pilot involved is at present on service. On his return, you will inform him that he is to be posted to a conventional piston-engined Fleet. The reasons and the details for this decision I will leave you to decide.

I recall very clearly that when the question of this pilot's future at first arose, a dozen happy solutions came immediately to my mind. I assumed that you would equally felicitously



arrive at the *beau milieu*, and that by now the matter would have been settled to the satisfaction of all concerned.

By once again allowing you a fairly free rein in exactly how and what the pilot is told, I am giving you a further opportunity to justify the confidence which heretofore the Company has reposed in you——

As he read it, the expression on Manningham's face did not change. He folded the letter up. He replaced it in the envelope.

Then he looked beyond his desk to the empty chair, used so many times before for aircrew and ground crew, for visitors and advisers, for delinquents and friends, already in his mind seeing George Gort sitting there in his Sunday best, his periwinkle blue eyes wide open, waiting with his arms folded for what the Fleet Superintendent had to say to him—*this* time.

Dallas swung the car to the left, out of the traffic stream. Then he jammed on his brakes and swore.

Between their imposing brick pillars, the wrought-iron factory gates were closed. Not only closed. Locked and chained.

Irritably, he hooted his horn. An Atlas Aviation policeman came out of a little wooden hut to peer through the bars. Recognising Dallas, he produced a key and slowly began to open up.

The pilot drove through. He stopped again, just inside. He waited till the gates were closed behind him. Then he called out through the open driving window: "What's all this in aid off?"

Airport policemen always know everything, usually before anyone else. This one Dallas had always before found friendly. But there was no smiling nod today. Just: "Orders."

"Got another rocket missile contract . . . have you?"

"Security," said the policeman mysteriously. "Security."

"That word!" Dallas grunted, and let the car move again, on towards the administration buildings. Small though it was, the gate business was another gritty ingredient for him to swallow. The taste of Judd was still with him from the scene four days

ago. And ever since Gort's Check, he had felt like a stranger in this factory. Pickering's displeasure seemed to loom over everything. In fact, the only thing that was good about the day was the weather. Though it was only just after nine, already it was warm and sunny. With any luck, he would be able to get Braddock's day training pretty well finished off.

He parked the car and walked up to his office. On his desk was a note from Pickering to say that Victor Kilo, the aircraft promised him for training this morning, *would unfortunately not now be available.*

He got on to the telephone immediately. A secretary answered: "I'm sorry, Captain Dallas . . . but Mr Pickering has already gone to the Prayer Meeting."

"Get him to phone me as soon as he comes out of it . . . would you?"

"Yes, I will, Captain Dallas."

Every morning, all the heads of departments, the Chief Designer, the Sales Manager, Production Manager, Service Manager, together (sometimes) with a director or two, and (rarely) a Company test pilot met in the General Manager's Office to discuss production progress, hold-ups, unforeseen eventualities and contracts. Known universally as the Prayer Meeting, this began the factory day, and normally lasted three-quarters of an hour. By tradition, it was sacrosanct and inviolable.

Dallas banged down the receiver. He picked up his pen and began angry doodles on the blotting paper in front of him. His training commitments were now getting well behindhand. Apart from Braddock, he had two captains who had almost finished their Ground School on the aircraft and were waiting to fly. He felt the same restless male urge to get moving, to keep progressing, that makes most things – not only Phoenixes – go forward in the world. • Something had to be done before the autumn fogs came down; before the wet west winds blew in the English winter.

But what the hell could he do without any aircraft?

A big thump on the door announced Braddock, grinning all over his face, whistling *Oh what a beautiful morning!* He beamed

at Dallas and said, "Why waste flying weather like this on Aussies?"

Dallas said shortly, "We're not!"

"*Not?*" The beam faded. "Ten . . . isn't it? We're going up at ten?"

"Not likely"—Dallas handed over Pickering's note—"now."

The Australian grimaced as he read it. "Hell! More hanging around!"

Dallas went on drawing an inky-haired brunette on the blotting paper.

Braddock put his brief-case on the desk. "Know something?"

"Very little."

"Ever since I joined the Phoenix Fleet . . . I've spent my time just hanging around on the ground." Braddock joined his brief-case on the edge of the desk. "Well . . . what d'you want me to do?"

"Hang around some more. Might get an aircraft for an hour, later."

At ten-thirty, they were still both hanging around. Dallas had been going through his Training Syllabus, satisfying himself again that it could not be improved upon, was water-tight, air-tight, foolproof—whatever adjective might at various times be thought applicable to flying instruction. Braddock had thumbed through three aeronautical magazines and was now gloomily staring out of the window at the roofs of the engine shops.

Dallas threw away the Training Syllabus and picked up the telephone.

"I'm sorry, Captain Dallas," said the same sweet sing-song voice. "But the Prayer Meeting . . ."

"Not *still* going on . . . surely?"

"I'm afraid so. But the *minute* it's over——"

"Thank you."

When the receiver was back in its accustomed position of quietness, Braddock said, "I suppose it's made it more difficult . . . not having Victor Fox?"

Dallas gave a brief nod. "All the same, we had Victor Kilo yesterday. What I want to know is . . . why we can't have it today?"

"Any chance this afternoon?"

"No chance. Scheduled for an electrical mod."

Together --and for different reasons--in this small isolated cell, surrounded by their 10,000 hosts, the two pilots conducted an anti-aircraft-manufacturers meeting. They had at least, Dallas thought to himself, a bit of peace. The testing of the jet engine had stopped. And they were giving the wind tunnel a rest at last, after the belting they'd been giving it all last week. They could hear themselves talk. Delays, lack of dovetailing of policy, high-handedness, inability to understand airline difficulties were discussed at length. Even the locking of the gates--which Braddock, too, had experienced--was considered an infringement of the liberties of British Empire Airways pilots.

They talked with considerable animation. But the telephone remained silent.

At eleven o'clock, however, a faint oil-less squeak could be heard in the distance, gradually getting louder down the corridor.

"Well, at least," Dallas said, standing up, "we can have some tea."

They ambushed the trolley just outside the office, as it came rolling placidly round the corner. A white-coated girl served them with two mugs of very hot tea from a small urn. Braddock said he was hungry and bought a sticky sugar bun.

And then suddenly, as Dallas was paying for it, the Australian said, "There's Victor Kilo now!"

The corridor window gave out on to the eastern end of the factory airfield. In the background was the railway line, the perimeter track, the beginning of Runway 25. Closer, was the pagoda-shaped generator house, and at an angle the huge side of the Production hangar. The great power-driven doors had opened. A tractor with tow-bar attached was slowly moving. From the shadows inside was emerging the long silver shape of Victor Kilo.

The two pilots walked to the window. Now that the aircraft was out on the tarmac, ground-crew were disengaging the tow-bar from the nose-wheel. The tractor wheeled round in a semi-circle and returned in to the interior.

Dallas was just saying, "Maybe we're going to get some training

in, after all," when he saw that already there were two faces in the pilots' seats. He recognised one of them.

The office of the Atlas test pilots was on the other side of the airfield, near the Control Tower, and generally speaking, they kept very much to themselves. Dallas knew most of them only by sight: but this man had instructed him on the Phoenix.

As they watched, all four jets were started. The aircraft taxied to the end of the runway, and with a shattering roar disappeared from view behind the wing of the hangar.

"That's Victor Kilo . . . that was!" said Braddock unnecessarily.

Dallas looked over his shoulder through the open office door to the telephone on his desk as though he was doubting its silence. He shrugged his shoulders. "I thought they'd finished the factory acceptance tests on Victor Kilo."

He turned back to the steaming mug of tea on the window ledge. He was drinking it down, when again Victor Kilo came in sight, glistening in the sunshine, this time about four miles away from the end of the runway, descending wheels down - from 800 feet. It came gliding over the hedge, brushed the tarmac with its tyres, and then with the jets suddenly opened to full power, again disappeared from sight behind the hangar.

"Company Chief Test Pilot doing touch-and-go landings," Dallas said. "Bit odd!"

"I suppose that's what he is doing? Can't see much from here -- --"

"What else?" Dallas said. He was keeping his eyes higher now, on the same piece of blue sky above the railway line. "Look . . . here he is again! Doing tight circuits."

In silence, they watched the Phoenix come in for a landing and take off again, come in for a landing and take off again, come in for a landing and take off again.

"Makes me bloody angry . . . that sort of thing," Dallas said bitterly. "Circuits and bumps . . . exactly what we want. If that's all they're doing . . . why the hell don't they let us do 'em?"

**I** He lay back in his seat, gently humming to himself. There could never be any greater peace than this. All round the black windscreen, the stars glittered and glowed at him - not one missing. No cloud. Nothing but infinity stretching above and beside him, and 40,000 feet below - if it was below, for nothing could be seen down there in that pitch darkness - the province of Rajasthan went blind-flying past. The Phoenix, homeward bound now from Singapore, held by the automatic pilot, was steady enough to be still, stopped, the four jet engines just murmuring their power. A small green aurora hung over the Flight Deck instruments. The First Officer snoozed. Behind the left-hand seat, Gort could hear the slight *click-click* of the Radio Officer's morse key.

He stretched, yawned, shifted his oxygen mask to a more comfortable position over his face.

The soft pattering of feet made him turn his head. The stewardess was collecting empty cups, used plates. He smiled at her.

"Passengers all asleep, Miss Brent?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good!"

He paused. He was always shy with any girl on his crew, awkward, knowing he should say something pleasant, something friendly, aware that she, too, must be shy of him. "It's been a smooth trip so far, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And a nice night."

"Yes, it is."

"Warm enough, is it . . . at the back?" He glanced at the air-conditioning panel, reassuring himself that the mechanical means which kept them all alive was ramming humidified air from the engines into the pressurised cabin at a satisfactory temperature. "Sixty-seven degrees Fahrenheit." He smiled at her again. "We're lucky! Out there" - he tapped the perspex of his window - "it's zero. And that's warm for this height!"

But unmoved, unimpressed, she just put out her hand for the cup by his side. "Finished with this . . . have you, sir?"

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

She went. The Radio Officer stopped sending. Gort's eyes swept out again over the night horizon, and then—a little lower, but the same left-to-right movement—over all his phosphorescent dials. He edged a red-topped throttle lever a fraction forward. Then as though it was a barometer, he tapped the radio compass, its needle wavering slightly a few degrees to port.

The First Officer opened his eyes. "That Kotah beacon, sir?"

"Yes," he said. "We're cleared to descend from there. Estimating Ranjibad in just over the hour."

"Any sign of that layer cloud Calcutta told us about?"

"Not yet. I've been watching. Quite clear ahead."

"Might have dissipated," the First Officer said. "Often does . . . at night over India."

"*Sometimes* does." A gentle correction. The needle on the compass began to oscillate violently, and then swung hard over. "That's Kotah now!"

He leaned over to disengage the automatic pilot. He reduced the power on the engines to 8000 r.p.m. Very slightly, he eased the control column forward.

He still kept his eyes ahead. In jet aircraft, cloud flying could sometimes be unpleasant. Layer clouds were all right—flat and thin, not bumpy—but there were bad up-draughts and down-draughts in cumulus which could exert tremendous loads on wings travelling over them at such high speeds. Now at 38,000 feet, descending, there was still nothing, no dark shadow visible, but it was still necessary to be careful, especially at this time of year, in the middle of the monsoon.

Leaving its higher element, the Phoenix came down gracefully. Shading his eyes, the First Officer peered out of his side window. He said, "I think the stuff's just below us now, sir," and Gort saw it himself: the sudden grey shape of it, endless as a sea, swirling through the darkness under them.

He flattened the aircraft out, and drew level just above the stratus, letting the fuselage dip sometimes down into it, the cloud like silent waves breaking over them, the red light on the nose suddenly visible, muzzy, reflected in the water vapour, and then

rising out into the clear—ducking-and-draking it at 480 miles and hour, joyfully in and out.

But this was not just fun at a heavenly seaside. Gort was testing it, seeing if it was bumpy, finding out if it was, after all, as flat as it was forecast, his eyes looking out for ominous bumps in the darkness ahead.

"Layer cloud," he said, at last. "Just seems to be layer cloud."

Down went the nose again under the surface, this time for good. The cloud closed noiselessly over their heads. Gort drew back the throttles a little. He watched the air-speed indicator, keeping the needle steady on 240 knots Indicated—at this height 425 True—the laid-down speed for a normal descent.

The aircraft descended nicely, smoothly. The altimeter moved back, past 32,000 feet. He noticed that the outside temperature was approaching zero Centigrade. There must be a very high freezing level.

But they were still in cloud.

A frown crossed Gort's face. High altitude layer cloud—if it was innocent—was nearly always thin. He should have been through the stuff by now. He did not like—nobody liked—flying a jet aircraft through cloud on a dark night. Just in case of rough weather he put on the *Fasten Your Seat Belt* sign.

He put his hands on the throttles to draw them back further, to slow up their forward speed through this blind unknown through which they were hurtling. The altimeter slipped past 30,000 to 27,000 feet. The First Officer was just saying, "Bit more to this than they reckoned," when suddenly—no warning, no turbulence, nothing—there was a crackling all round them, a clatter and a banging against the fuselage.

In the clammy greyness just ahead, Gort saw dark shapes falling like round wet marbles: glistening, icy, turned ruby by the nose light.

He shouted out, "Hail . . . huge hailstones!"

The port wing lurched to the left. Thrown higher by an enormous upcurrent, the Phoenix soared. Gort was grappling with the stick, trying to straighten up, when the whole wind-screen in front of him exploded in his face.



Immediately, he ducked his head. He heard a whistling, a thud. And then immediate pandemonium. His oxygen mask, his collar, his tie, were wrenched off, went flying out in front of him. A fantastic sucking sensation pulled him forwards against his straps. His head dragged towards the empty wind-screen, as papers, maps, books, the crews' oxygen masks went out into the night in whirling, shrieking, tornado circles.

Up and up and up went the Phoenix, blown by the power of the storm beneath it.

Gort kept his head down. The whole cockpit, in contrast to the black night outside, had gone white. Thick fog swirled over everything. He caught sight momentarily of incongruous things, wreathed in mist: the furious waving of his shoelaces, a thick pencil mark some ground engineer had drawn on the rudder adjustment bar.

It was all over in five seconds. When he looked up, the fog had gone. The out-rushing air had been replaced by a wind roaring into his face at six times the speed of a hurricane.

He lowered his head again, yelled "Air brakes!" to the First Officer. Then he pushed the nose hard down, waiting to feel the sudden deceleration, holding the Phoenix as steady as he could in the mounting turbulence around him.

Instead of slowing down, the speed built up. "Air brakes!" he cried again.

"Given you them!" the First Officer howled back. "Think they've gone . . . not working!"

Gort suddenly felt a tightening round his ribs. Above even the rushing sting of the cold air around his bent head, he could hear the quick gasps of his own breathing.

"Got to slow down somehow!" he shouted. "Wings'll be off in a moment!"

He closed all four throttles to 6000 r.p.m. Lower than that, and the jet flames might go out. He pulled the nose hard back.

The furious rattling of the hail had stopped. Climbing even higher now, he was more breathless than ever. His chest ached. Fire seemed to have consumed his lungs. In pain, he tried to think.

He knew he had to get down quickly. Up here, the air was

so thin, it would hardly support motionless life. Wrestling, as he and the First Officer were both doing now, in the pitching, tossing turbulence, they were burning up far more oxygen than normal. Their whole bodies heaved up and down, trying desperately to replace it.

Gort felt himself choking. The instruments swam in an oily green river in front of him. Screwing up his eyes, he tried to keep the air-speed indicator steady enough to read. He watched the twisting, shaking needle so slowly dropping: 235 . . . 230 . . . 225—

He heard a lorelei singing behind his throbbing eyes: *come down, come down: down here there's air, real sweet air, the juicy breath of life: come down, come down, come quickly down for air.*

With all the power of his disciplined heart, he fought against it. He knew that if he dived towards the earth, the speed would build up: and hitting the upcurrents of the storm so fast, the Phoenix would crack open and disintegrate in no time.

Instead, he pulled the nose up even further, trying to get the speed lower. But the perfectly streamlined Phoenix, supported by the rising outside air, whistled onwards, free-wheeling through the dark violence, reluctant to slow down except gradually, gradually - 210 . . . 200 - -

Before his eyes now there was nothing but a whirl of black and green and red, dancing round the phosphorescent hand of the air-speed indicator. The air still shrieked through the wind-screen around him, as he steeled himself, forcing himself away from the lure of descending, awaiting the air-speed for which his flaps were stressed.

190 . . . 180 - - -

At last, 175! He hauled back on the flap lever. The aircraft rose with the extra lift. But the speed jerked lower: 170 . . . 165 . . . 160 . . . 155 - -

It was the highest speed the Book allowed the undercarriage to be lowered. He slammed the lever down.

And now, with all that drag - slowing up, swinging from side to side, shaking all over - the Phoenix started to drop.

He felt ill. *Dfy* retching racked his mouth. The instrument

panel seemed to be toppling crazily over to the left. He had no lungs, he couldn't have. Someone had torn them out. Black shapes spun, merging with the dancing gyrations of green burning needles.

He watched the altimeter, going down, swing past 26,000 feet . . . 25,000 . . . 24,000 ———

The storm, stronger down here, banged viciously at the wings. Feeling no help from the right-hand controls, Gort glanced to the right. The First Officer was slumped in his seat—out from lack of oxygen. Hazily, he heard the Radio Officer call, "Shall I try to get him out?"

In reply, he managed: "No . . . watch me . . . in case I——"

23,000——

He couldn't breathe. Some wild thing, the wind perhaps, was round his throat, throttling him. *He couldn't breathe!*

An appalling fear flooded over him that he would just give up, go to sleep, leave the Phoenix to turn over on its back and die. His hands had gone weak: hardly capable of holding the stick, let alone moving it. He would not have the strength to go on. Blackness enveloped him.

He forced himself to watch the muzzy wobbling of the instruments on the blind flying panel. Clenching his hands, he hauled up the wings as they dropped and lurched all over the sky: fearing that any second one of the upcurrents that was slowing the descent, fiercer than the others, would break up Pickering's frail metal skin that was all the protection they had against the violence of the outside air.

He pushed the nose down further. He saw the altimeter: 22,000. I can't breathe, he thought, I must have air. I've got to have air to go on. I feel ill. I feel dizzy. I feel sick.

He fought his way down: conscious all the time that he must not exceed 155 knots, the speed the gear was stressed for, the best speed, according to the Book, to—he remembered the actual word, such a curious word—*negotiate* a storm. But he tried his best to keep to it—though the needle on the indicator danced up and down, unable to keep still a moment.

*I can't breathe . . .*

The Phoenix seemed to have slowed up on the descent. The currents kept the aircraft high, warding it off from the life-giving oxygen that was spread out so bountifully at lower levels: waiting to be breathed, so much of it down there, so little up here.

21,000 . . . 20,000 ---

His ears were aching, ringing with pain. He longed for the end of the storm. It could not go on much longer surely: this minutes-long nightmare must have an end, could not be as eternal as infinity. 19,000 . . . 18,000—the altimeter needle rotated backwards with maddening impartiality.

The speed—the speed was too fast. He could feel the wings almost flapping, the vibrations shivering the whole fuselage. He pulled up the nose slightly, biting his lips till he felt the blood, oddly comforting in his mouth, a warm human reminder in the mad whirling blackness of the elements around him.

17,000 16,000 ---

It was easier now. He gulped at the air, still whirling past his lowered head. He attacked and devoured it where he found it, swallowing it in great mouthfuls. It was smoother, too. Not so much quivering on the stick. They were coming down much faster. At 13,000 feet he had enough consciousness to spare to feel the cold whirlwind through the windscreen streaming through his wet hair. He began to feel better, less sick: the black round-about in his mind slowed and stopped.

10,000 feet

Suddenly, the red glow from the nose disappeared. The Phoenix stopped rocketing from side to side so violently.

They were out of cloud. It was raining. Gort could feel it hard on his head, heard it hissing all over the aircraft. Out of the side window, he saw lights glimmering up damply from the ground. There were stars ahead.

He felt air moving in freely, easily into his lungs. He could see more. His arms felt stronger. Levelling off at 7,000 feet, he raised the gear and the flaps, pushed the throttles forward practically to the stops. The Phoenix leapt into the clear.

The Radio Officer asked, "You all right, sir?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes . . . I'm all right. Better do something for Mr. Reeve. Portable oxygen bottles . . . have we

still got one of those left? And find out how the passengers are, would you?"

Twenty minutes later, when things throughout the Phoenix fuselage were calmer, when the First Officer, recovered now, was sitting in the left-hand seat pressing a cushion against the empty windscreen, the Radio Officer handed Gort a message that had just come through from Control: *Warning all aircraft—upper air disturbance developing in N.W. Rajasthan.*

Gort smiled. Then he took out his handkerchief, wiped his hands and face carefully, saw the dim string of the Ranjibad runway lights ahead, and got himself ready to land the Phoenix from the right-hand seat.

In Mr. Robinson's small office at Ranjibad airport, he sat down at the desk to write his Voyage Report.

SECTOR: Singapore - Calcutta—Ranjibad.

AIRCRAFT: Victor Delta.

CAPTAIN: Gort.

DATE: July 30th.

1. Five minutes delay ex-Singapore was due to late arrival of a passenger.

2. Calcutta again put up a good show in turning us round, taking thirty minutes only for refuelling.

3. After beginning descent, at 27,000 feet or thereabouts, the aircraft was without warning struck by hail of uncommonly large size and ice-cold hardness, which punctured the left-hand windscreen, and resulted in complete loss of pressurisation, together with crew's oxygen masks, route books, maps, charts, and the First Officer's hat, which must all be written off on Form 3652 A.

Thereafter, the aircraft encountered considerable turbulence.

It was necessary to descend, but this was made more difficult by the failure of the hydraulic air brakes, and the length of time the Phoenix takes, due to its excellent aerodynamic qualities, to lose the necessary airspeed before the flaps can be lowered—especially in conditions of thin and rising air.

4. Two Astroliner aircraft, which were also caught in the disturbance, landed at Ranjibad airport with wings badly buckled at Station Seven. It is a matter of congratulation for the Atlas Aviation Company that the Phoenix suffered no damage whatever, although the stresses involved were considerable—even at 155 knots, the airspeed laid down in the Book for negotiating storms.

5. I would suggest that the straps on the oxygen masks should be improved and strengthened. It is not much use insisting on the pilot wearing his mask all the time on duty in case of pressurisation failure, if—when the emergency occurs—it is ripped off his face and disappears out of the aircraft with everything else that is loose.

6. Fourteen of the passengers fainted from lack of oxygen.—Many of the others were distressed, but all recovered under attention at lower level. The passengers were told that there had been a slight pressurisation failure, and on the whole, considering, they were very cheerful. They are being accommodated overnight at the Imperial Hotel with the crew, to await departure with Captain Creighton tomorrow afternoon, after the windscreen has been replaced. Three of them—Mrs. Wright, Mr. Drinkwater, and Sir Henry Heseltine, all of whom are elderly and have suffered from oxygen starvation and shock, asked me particularly whether they could come back with me on the normal scheduled Wednesday service, the day after tomorrow. This I have authorized at the Company's expense, in the interests of humanity, and therefore in the end, of the Company itself.

He finished it. He signed it. He tucked it into the long Ship's Papers envelope. Then he called, "Mr. Robinson!" and the Station Manager, who had been in the Operations Room next door, came into his own office, and said, "Yes, sir?"

"Passengers gone to the hotel?"

"Yes, Captain . . . they have."

"Any of them see the empty windscreen?"

"No, sir. None."

"Tell your maintenance men to say nothing."

"I will, sir."

Gort stood up and picked up his hat. "It was just one of those things, you understand, Mr. Robinson," he said. "I've never met hail that size in an aircraft before. But if they knew at this stage in its development, people might talk . . . might get the wrong idea of the Phoenix's possibilities at high altitude." He put his hat on his head and walked towards the door. "Give a dog a bad name, you know . . . that sort of thing."

Following him, the Station Manager said, "I understand, Captain. I understand perfectly."

His taxi was waiting in the darkness outside. As it swept out of the airport, now the warm air rushing in through the open window was a refreshment to his serge-covered body. At the hotel, in his air-conditioned room, he took off his coat, lay down on the bed, hugged his arms tight across his chest, blissfully closed his eyes.

But not for long. It was late. There was dinner to think of. And his passengers, seventy-seven of them his charges he had to see how they were accommodated, how they were faring in this huge hotel.

He had a shower. He dressed himself in a Singapore-washed white shirt, a dark red tie, his best grey lightweight suit. He put a clean handkerchief in the top pocket. He took out his shoe-cleaning kit and rubbed at his shoes. He brush-and-combed his hair carefully.

Then he went downstairs. There, in the hall, he saw Creighton, who said, "Hear you had a bit of a rough trip?"

They stood talking together. Technicalities mainly, some meteorological experiences. Then Gort put his hand in his inside pocket, drew out his letter to Charlotte. "Do you mind?" he said. "When you get home?"

"No, of course not."

"Thank you. And now —" He did up his jacket. "I'd better go in to dinner before it's too late." He waved his hand. "Good trip!"

They were all eating when he came into the dining-room. They all raised their faces from their food to look at him. He smiled at them, nodded, took his place at the crew table, over

which flew on a silver stalk—Judd's idea, Judd's design—the triangular pale blue flag of the Phoenix Fleet.

His crew were already half way through their meal. A Sikh steward gave him the menu. "Ah, let me see! Mulligatawny soup . . . yes, I think so! Then please . . . the roast beef."

He spread his napkin over his lap. The conversation proceeded on its normal stilted level. There was in addition this time an air of forced cheerfulness. As they ate, they complained about the Met service, talked about Singapore, not mentioning the actual emergency they had encountered, till the Radio Officer said suddenly, "Wasn't there any sign of cumulus on the horizon, sir?"

"Dark, of course, but we saw none . . . did we, Mr. Reeve?" Gort started on fruit salad. "The stuff must have been hidden in stratus. Rather an unpleasant surprise!"

As they finished, his crew left one by one. Alone at the table, Gort sat for a few moments, watching the Sikhs silently clearing away. Then he pushed back his chair and went thoughtfully into the lounge for coffee.

This was his moment. This was a duty—a privilege he held dear to his heart: supervising the passengers when they were delayed or stranded, looking after the comfort of Lord This, the connection of Mr. That, the dilemma of Lady Dash, the concern of Miss Blank. He was a father to them, their leader in a strange situation, in a strange land: a rock of defence for them all in the vicissitudes of this new and unfamiliar form of transportation.

Round the majestic room softly carpeted, under the cut-glass glitter of the chandeliers, he went—talking, laughing, answering questions, till coming to the corner by the marble mantelpiece, he saw them sitting together on a flamboyant sofa, and he pulled up a chair, put his half-full coffee-cup on the oval table in front of them, and sat down and said, "How are you now, Mrs. Wright? Feeling better, Sir Henry? What about you, Mr. Drinkwater?"

They were all still a little shaky. Sir Henry told him his small snow-white V-shaped beard jutting out a little as he spoke.

"But so comfortable!" Mrs. Wright held up hands glazed by age, tied up in strings of blue veins. She had a fluttering kind of voice, rising and dying away by turns. "So kind!" Her



watery eyes, fixed hard on Gort, went suddenly puzzled. "Your face, Captain . . . it's so familiar! You know, I'm sure——"

But still living in his past, earnestly owlsh behind round glasses—precise little voice, precise little features—Mr. Drinkwater interrupted. "It was pressurisation failure, you say, Captain?"

"That's right."

"Does such a thing often happen?"

"It has never happened before on the Phoenix to my certain knowledge."

"Disturbing . . . *very* disturbing at the back! Poor Sir Henry"—momentarily reflecting the chandelier's sunline, his spectacles became two side-by-side full moons—"he went quite white."

"My lungs." Sir Henry tugged apologetically at his beard. "My lungs, I fear, are not what they were."

"But everybody had trouble breathing," said Mr. Drinkwater. "Then there was . . . I tell you . . . a whirlwind, a veritable whirlwind throughout the ——"

"We've met, Captain!" Suddenly Mrs. Wright's head quivered with excited pleasure, as she looked up at him. "I may be old . . . but I never forget a face!"

Gort drank the last of his coffee, smiled as he put the cup down in the saucer, shook his head.

"And Captain," said Mr. Drinkwater, "weren't we a long time coming down?"

"We had to go carefully on account of the storm."

"I tell you, my ears——"

"Was it an airquake we were in, Captain?" Sir Henry was having his little joke, polishing every word, exhibiting a connoisseur's dry wit against an aristocratic British background of humour in adversity. "There is an expression, is there not . . . minted, I believe, in the Royal Air Force . . . *upside-down-in-a-cloud—*"

"What height were we, Captain?"

"Oh . . . not very high, Mr. Drinkwater."

"So annoying! I cannot quite recall——" Mrs. Wright had turned her eyes away from their close scrutiny of the pilot, was

bending her head closer to the white beard, was saying in a loud whisper: "*What is the Captain's name again?*"

"Gort," Sir Henry whispered back. "G-o-r-t."

The head levelled up again. A ruby-ringed finger pointed. "It was at the Palmer's!"

"No, Mrs. Wright," Gort said. "I'm afraid not." He started to get up, but he had to sit down again when Mr. Drinkwater leaned across the table to say, "Now I was reading an article in a magazine the other day, and I'd like to know . . . this pressurisation failure you keep talking about, is it the same thing as explosive decompression?"

"Those are rather long words --"

"There was a weakness somewhere. I take it? Shouldn't that have been noticed at the pre-flight inspection?"

"It must have been the Grigsons? You know the Grigsons, Captain Gort?"

Again he shook his head. He stood up, and this time he stayed up. "Now I really think I must be going!"

But they would not let him go. It was an experience they had had, but now it was over they were all in their different ways exhilarated by it, stimulated, energised by an adventure in the upper atmosphere, not often granted to the earthbound human body. Sir Henry was encouraged to make his small jokes: Mr. Drinkwater was encouraged to search for scientific truth: Mrs. Wright was encouraged to search the dusty caverns of her memory.

The men asked more questions. They had to be reassured that it was all right to fly up there, at those fearful heights in that thin air - heartened, egged on, no question of giving up, just because they'd had a little bit of trouble. And all the time, a wobbly punctuation to the manly conversation, came the fluttery little female interjections: "When was it? Where was it?"

"Some story," Mrs. Wright was saying. "I know there was some story! Some splendid story! You're *quite* right! We haven't met! Some story about you . . . your photograph in all the papers."

Gort looked at his watch, started to move slowly, saying, "I hope you all sleep well tonight."

"It was here in Ranjibad!" Breathless now, her face quite pink with the effort of her search, in triumph Mrs. Wright declared: "Some brave story in Ranjibad! Of course, *you* won't say a word! But Captain"—almost archly the jewelled finger wagged at him—"I shall remember! I shall remember it soon!"

As he walked away, Gort heard her say: "Some perfectly *splendid* story about taking off, here in Ranjibad — —"

He had a few words with other passengers, methodically working round everybody before going up to his room alone. He undressed. He hung his grey suit on a hanger, and put it carefully away into the wardrobe. He left his other clothes neatly folded on a chair. He got into his pyjamas, washed and cleaned his teeth. Then he climbed into bed. He put out the light, and lay on his back, staring up at the high dark ceiling above him.

After two quiet days, spent mostly resting in his room, or shopping in the town, he was again sitting at Mr. Robinson's desk at the airport, signing the load sheet for the sector RANJIBAD CAIRO-ROME-LONDON.

"What!" he said. "only 48 passengers! That's bad!" He scanned the names on the passenger list beside him. "Where's Sir Henry Heseltine . . . Mr. Drinkwater?"

"Oh, they've gone, Captain."

"But I particularly authorised . . . for reasons of health . . . they could stay two nights in Ranjibad!"

"They phoned to say they were quite well now."

"But Mrs. Wright-----"

"All of them, sir. They've all gone. They all insisted on taking off yesterday . . . with Captain Creighton."

**I**2 Pickering's voice sounded half tired, half irritated: "I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. A delay. There's a delay in delivery of the Mark II Phoenix."  
"Why?" Manningham asked.

There was a moment's pause on the other end of the line. Then: "Modifications."

"What modifications?"

"Oh . . . number of things. Improvements. We've got to improve things all the time."

Manningham said grimly, "Wouldn't be something to do with strengthening the windscreen, would it?"

On the desk in front of him, the Fleet Superintendent had Gort's laconic Voyage Report on the explosive decompression incident, which had arrived with Creighton on Victor Delta that morning. From his own knowledge, he had been able to fill in the gaps. He could picture the scene in that wild airless cockpit at 27,000 feet. He had wondered how many of the younger pilots would have had the self-discipline to descend in the laid-down way that Gort had done: and how many of them would have gone plunging instead through all that turbulence at 400 miles an hour—to leave the Phoenix in little pieces all over Rajasthan.

Pickering, too, had obviously had a report. He said shortly, "Hail at that height? Can't guard against everything."

"Perhaps oxygen masks for the passengers?"

"Not necessary."

"Something to do with the air brakes?"

"Occasional failures of accessories are inevitable."

"Well, you must admit," Manningham said carefully, "it was a good show. Proved how strong the Phoenix is."

"We knew that already."

Rather disappointed at such an ungracious reaction towards Gort's achievement, Manningham said sharply, "Well, how long's the delay?"

"Three months . . . four months."

"What about our schedules? The Training Programme we've arranged?"

"Just have to wait . . . I'm sorry." And then: "Talking about Training, is Dallas moving into his new offices at your end yet?"

"He's about to . . . yes."

"Good." Pickering's voice was full of satisfaction. "Don't want to sound inhospitable . . . but we need that room now ourselves."

"This delay's going to ruin our pre-publicity. Apart from all our plans——"

"I can't help it. I'm sorry."

"But what *are* the modifications?"

"Technical. Highly technical. Tell you when I've got more time." And then with a sudden bitterness: "Thank your stars you're not a designer, Manningham! You get an idea. You work like hell. You involve yourself and thousands in a project costing millions. And as a reward . . . you find yourself part of the National Economy."

"I see."

"We have our difficulties."

"And so do we," Manningham said.

They said goodbye to each other without much cordiality.

The Fleet Superintendent replaced the receiver slowly, trying to calculate in his mind the damaging extent of this news. It would throw all sorts of things out of gear—training especially.

He sighed. Another difficulty cropping up. Something else that would have to be dealt with.

Like this Gort affair.

His eyes went back to the report. He was secretly not sorry—since there had been a happy ending—that this incident had occurred. In some ways, it could not have happened at a more felicitous time.

He reached out for a blank piece of paper, and began to compose a letter in reply to the President's Thunderbolt:

—Thank you for your letter of the 27th July.

I would wish respectfully to point out that Captain Gort was checked out on the Phoenix by Captain Dallas, who was very satisfied with the competence of his performance. I have good reason to have the greatest confidence in Captain Dallas as a Training Captain, and he has always shown a remarkable ability in assessing the flying efficiency of his fellow pilots. Under the circumstances, and in the absence of any instruction to the contrary from Head Office, and with an acute pilot shortage in the Fleet, I felt there was no alternative but that Captain Gort should return to the Route immediately.

Since that time, Captain Gort has already most strikingly demonstrated that this faith in his flying ability on the Phoenix was well founded. Two days ago, as you will know by now, he experienced an explosive decompression at 27,000 feet in dangerous turbulence, coupled with the failure of his hydraulic air brakes. Deprived of his mask, and suffering from acute oxygen starvation, Captain Gort exerted a magnificent self-discipline in slowing the aircraft down to the exact prescribed speed before descending safely through severe up-currents which badly damaged two slower conventional-type aircraft.

I would most earnestly request that the Board should consider some recognition of this achievement, in the form of a recommendation for the Queen's medal for Valuable Services in the Air.

In view of this incident, which perhaps puts matters in a different light, I thought you might not wish me to implement your instructions for the time being. I will not therefore see Captain Gort, till I receive your further communication.

After his stand-off on return, I intend to put Captain Gort on Duty Crew for a week, so that he will be available at any time for me to take such immediate action as you deem now necessary on the issue in which he is involved . . .

He read it over carefully before sending it in to his secretary to type and despatch by the Company's own mail system.

Next day, around the same time as Gort brought the Thursday Singapore Super-Express Service a little late on schedule into London, he received a reply.

There was nothing of the Thunderbolt about this one:

My dear Manningham,

I was extremely pleased to have your letter, and though, of course, I did know of Captain Gort's achievement on Phoenix Victor Delta, it was gratifying to discover that you had hit on much the same plan as I had myself with which to make it memorable within the annals of the Company. I have talked the incident over with both our Director of Medical Services and with Captain Judd, and your "earnest request" (as you call it!) will most certainly not go unnoticed.

However, the Board feel that a recommendation for the Queen's Medal for Valuable Services in the Air, since the citation would necessitate a description of explosive decompression on the *Phoenix* that would inevitably be made public, would be unfair to the industry as a whole. Taken out of its context of years of work and tests and trials, this isolated incident at this stage of civil jet operations gives a misleading picture. We felt -- and I am sure that Captain Gort feels the same -- that we would like to keep this "within the family". It therefore gives me great pleasure to instruct you to inform Captain Gort at the earliest opportunity that written in his records will now be found a Commendation from the Company.

In addition, we felt that better use could be found for Captain Gort's immense experience in the air than employment as just another Route pilot. So that at the same time as you tell him of the Commendation, you will let him know that he is immediately appointed to the newly created position of Adviser on the Far Eastern Route to the Operations Director at Head Office. . . .

As he read the letter, Manningham smiled. It did not escape him that by this administrative position on the ground, the President intended to achieve much the same result as his earlier letter. But this was victory, where the other had been defeat. There was good news awaiting George now.

He considered for a moment how best to break it to him. This office had unpleasant associations. He would get Jean to invite the Gorts to supper tomorrow, and then --

He picked up the President's letter and put it firmly into his OUT tray. The Gort affair was over. Now it could be filed and finished with.

"Hello, George!"

As Dallas came through the swing doors, he saw Gort and his crew sorting out their mail from the alphabetical cubby-holes that ranged on either side of the small hall leading to Operations.

They all lifted their faces—five men and a girl—but apart from the familiar one he only recognised two of them. Spending as he did most of his time in Training, he had not yet had the chance to get to know many of the Route crews. He had given First Officer Reeve his Phoenix familiarisation: and he knew that the name of the stewardess was something like Jennifer Brett or Brent only because she shared the same flat as Joyce Mitchell, and he had seen her once, been introduced, one night he had called there, months ago. Feeling that some sign of greeting was necessary under the circumstances, he nodded at both of them, and received in return two slight nods back.

"Heard you had a rough trip." Motivated by the almost standard reflex action of a mid-thirties, R.A.F. trained pilot, unconsciously he had used the same words as Creighton had done at Ranjibad. Then he made his own spontaneous contribution: "Sorry about that."

In the accepted sense, like Manningham, the Training Captain had not, as a matter of fact, been sorry at all. Instead, it could almost be said that he'd been glad. He would not have admitted to himself that this trip to the airport was primarily concerned with having a look at the window-less frame, and having a few words with Manningham, but such was—perhaps unconsciously—nevertheless the case. The words of Pickering, Robinson and Judd had all had their effect: doubt is easy to lay in a mind, especially over something that cannot be proved in black and white, and yet is assumed—for the security of the outside world, the public peace of mind—to be scientifically assessed and calculated. This performance of Gort's was a magnificent vindication of his judgment. Dallas had agreed with Manningham's view that few, if any, of the other Phoenix pilots could have dealt with a situation that was so outside the scope of a Training syllabus. Emergency descents—they could all do those—but that type was beyond reasonable expectation of what a human body could do. The thought of the older pilot's success pleased the younger one. And just the sight of Gort was heart-warming—standing there, reliability and confidence shining like a beacon from that red face, those blue eyes.

Gort said, "One of those things, Hugh."



Dallas looked round the crew, and to preserve the slightly flippant manner for which he was known, he said, "Must have livened up the trip for all of you." And then: "Passengers a bit upset, were they?"

"A little. Not too bad. Mr. Minty and Miss Brent"—so it was Brent, not Brett—"looked after them very well." And then, as though conscious of giving praise to one section and not the other, Gort added, "I had a good crew . . . situation like that . . . makes all the difference." Benevolently he beamed down at them, as they clustered round him looking, Dallas thought, like children who'd just received praise for being good, and were now hanging round for some more. It just occurred to him that perhaps he ought to say that Gort himself had done well, but he dismissed it from his mind immediately as embarrassing in front of the others. Rather patronising, too. And in any case, unnecessary.

There was a small silence while he tried to think of something to say, for they were all round him now, waiting— but in the end, all he could manage was to point to the large raffia shopping basket on the floor beside Gort's brief-case and say, "Been buying up Ranjibad, George?"

"Oh, just a bit of tea . . . chutney . . . that sort of thing." Then: "Busy, Hugh . . . these days, are you?"

"Will be soon, when we start moving into the new offices here. Not at present, though. No aircraft."

"So you'll be able to come along some night . . . and have that bite with us?"

Dallas hesitated. Unwarily, he'd been led into it. Again he felt the wave of doubt go over him regarding an apparently simple gesture of friendship. "Well, George ———"

"Charlotte was very anxious you should come."

She would not have been, he was quite certain of that. People always seemed to transmute their own desires into other people, and the little deception irritated him. The crew were still standing around them, opening and reading their orders and letters. The stewardess was nearest. She said, "Excuse me ——" and Dallas stepped aside for her to collect and go through the mail in the Bs.

"How about tomorrow?"

"I can't manage tomorrow."

"Well . . . then, next week. Haven't seen the roster yet, but Tuesday should be all right. What about Tuesday?"

Dallas listened to the soft shuffling of letters being sorted all round him, the tearing noise as an envelope was opened. He could think of nothing he could say about Tuesday except an unintentionally brusque: "Tuesday . . . yes, I can manage Tuesday."

"Fine!" Gort rubbed his hands. "Charlotte'll be pleased. Round about seven. We're in Quiggan Square, Mayfair. No. 2, Flat 6."

"Yes, I remember." Dallas smiled. "Thank you very much, George."

The crew had done with their letter collecting, were moving in a body towards the centre of the Operations Room. Gort waved his hand, said, "See you on Tuesday, Hugh," and followed them up to the linoleum-covered counter.

There, the week's crew rosters awaited them, and in the centre of the captain's was already typed DUTY CREW: GORT.

**I**3 Purposely, he had kept it for this moment. Evening time, after-supper time, quietly and privately in the garden, that was the right time to break such good news. He could hear the swish of the grass under their feet as they walked side by side. He could smell the damp earth and the sweet scent of the flowers. In front of them, over the lawn, stretched a bright gold oblong of light from the uncurtained window: and he could see Charlotte and his wife in the lounge, sitting talking by the fireplace. It was a moment of peace and comfort and kindness, fashioned specifically for the ending of an act—George Gort's—and on a high triumphant note. Manningham, as he told the man beside him of the Commendation, had a sudden reassuring sense of the rightness of things, of somewhere—inexplicably—a central core of justice.

"Edward, that's . . . that's very generous."

Gort was pleased, very pleased, just as Manningham had known he would be. He was smiling. In his effort for still further recognition, the Fleet Superintendent went on with his job of burnishing up the glitter of the prize. "Not many pilots get a Commendation from the Company."

"I don't suppose they do."

"Only four in the past six years. Last one was Ridley. You remember . . . the elephant that got loose in the freighter."

"I remember."

"So you see . . . it's pretty rare."

"I'm grateful, Edward. Very honoured."

"The Board . . . well, they try to be fair."

"I know that. I am quite sure they do."

"And they were delighted to be in a position to do it." Even as he said the words, Manningham's own pleasure was spoiled a little by the sound of their tinny half-truthfulness. But like anyone else in authority, he was also aware that he could say nothing else.

The two of them had reached the dahlias—once flaming, now dimmed by the oncoming darkness. It was the time to turn and they did it together, as Manningham went on: "And that's not all. You've been appointed Operations Adviser to Hullett in the Far Eastern Division."

He waited expectantly for the full impact of this further good news to make itself felt.

"You mean," Gort asked, "at Headquarters?"

"That's right. They need a man like you there."

A slight sound from the sky attracted their attention, and both looking up together, they saw in the last grey-blue light at high altitude a Comet move swiftly northwards. Recognising it, Manningham was immediately made aware of the competition that was pressing so closely behind the private enterprise of Empire Airways. Pointing up to its single-finned beauty, Manningham said, as though to impress on Gort the crying necessity for the best men to be in the best places. "I mean, George . . . the Phoenix won't have the lead much longer. There's the

Comet. Then the American jets are coming along. In a short time, the competition is going to be tremendous——"

Gort nodded. "I know that, Edward."

"While we can, we've got to establish ourselves on top. That's why you'll be so valuable as the Operations Adviser."

Gort said nothing for a moment. He appeared to be digesting the implication of this new appointment. Then he inquired: "When was this decided? This appointment?"

"Just a few days ago."

"But Hullett doesn't need any advice. He's done fifteen years on the Eastern Route himself."

"Not on the Phoenix. They want someone off the Phoenix. Jet experience."

"I'm surprised, then, that they didn't choose Judd."

"Judd hasn't got your experience on the Route."

"I haven't got his experience on the Phoenix." Gort shrugged his shoulders. "You said they wanted a Phoenix expert."

Something in the way he said it made Manningham glance sharply sideways at Gort's face. But there was nothing there except impassive good humour. He said, "Not only that. They want someone to give opinions, forecast trends, suggest improvements, stipulate operating procedures."

There was a long pause. Then "I don't know whether . . . at present . . . I'd be the right man"

"Don't be so modest! Of course you are! Nobody knows the run like you do."

"All the same . . ."

"And extremely interesting work"

"I do see that, but ---"

They turned, once again were moving towards the house, again facing the large window behind which the two women were, still sitting talking. Manningham said, "Charlotte'll be pleased."

"Charlotte won't want me hanging around"

"Of course she'll be pleased! She'll be as pleased as Jean was . . . when I got this job."

Gort gave a grunt, perhaps of agreement. "You're probably right. I don't know." He paused. "But Jean's your wife."

They had returned to the dahlias. And as again they turned,

their dark suits blending into the greyness of the air around them, Manningham spoke of something he had not mentioned for years. He had found it best in the past to leave private sorrows well alone. It was presuming to do otherwise. Now--perhaps it was the twilight, perhaps because the shadowy figure beside him was so obviously remembering, he said, "You still miss Mildred."

"We were . . . very close."

Manningham hesitated. Then he murmured, "It was a long time ago." They were the only words he could think of to say. He knew they were inadequate, but he was already regretting that he had allowed the conversation, which had started on such a successful note, to sink towards this sadness. At the same time, he was turning over in his mind a fact that he had not realised. Gort was lonely. He could see now that the whole Mayfair set-up would tend to isolate Gort on the Quiggan Square pinnacle that he had striven for. He would have little in common with his neighbours. No garden. He would find it difficult to find something to do on his stand-offs between trips. On the Route, there were people to talk to--the passengers, the crew, the station staff--and they would at least share his interest in flying. With a sudden burst of conscience, Manningham remembered several pressing invitations to Quiggan Square politely postponed or reluctantly accepted. He said, "Jean and I will be able to see more of you, too."

Gort nodded.

"We'll often be working together."

"But we are now."

"The salary's the same . . . but the possibilities of further promotion, they're much better. I mean you've been a Senior Captain . . . well, how long, George?"

Gort laughed and said, "Twenty years."

"And you don't just want to go on being just a Senior Captain till you retire?"

"No . . . I don't."

"Well, then . . . the appointment's effective immediately. From this moment. From this moment you accept."

But there was only silence from the man walking beside him. Again they reversed direction. And Manningham had a sudden,

a fantastic feeling that Gort was about to turn the job down. To smother such a conception, even in his mind, he said firmly, "That's all fixed, then."

There was still silence. Then Gort shook his head, and said, "No, Edward."

Manningham turned to look at him with fearful incomprehension. "What ever do you mean?"

"From the Company's point of view, I haven't the Phoenix experience to fill a position like that as it should be filled."

"The *Company's* point of view?" Manningham regarded him with horrified astonishment. He had not anticipated anything else but pleased acceptance. The whole Gort affair he had seen as neatly rounded off to the satisfaction of everyone. He had fought for Gort going back on the Route, aware how badly he would feel if he was summarily removed from the Phoenix after the accident, aware how necessary it was for a pilot to be always confident of his Company's trust. Manningham was presenting him with what seemed the perfect ending: a man who had had troubles surmounting those troubles, and rising successfully above them. He felt let down that now - given the opportunity - the man himself would not rise. He said, "You've got to think of yourself, as well."

"I do. But I know I'm primarily a pilot."

"And I'm primarily a pilot, too!" He was annoyed. A realist himself, he knew that an administrative position such as this was a rare enough plum for a pilot of Gort's age. He had been glad enough of the chance of a similar job - in not dissimilar circumstances. He was irritated that Gort had not jumped at it. It implied that *he* should not have jumped at it. His hands started moving restlessly, jerkily. Thrown off a decided course of action, now he was nervous, tensed up. "I also appreciate," he snapped, "that there are other positions in which *I* can better serve the Company."

"As Phoenix Fleet Superintendent . . . you're the best man for the job. This advisory position obviously needs considerable jet experience."

"You've got jet experience."

"And I'm getting more all the time. I've settled down to the

Phoenix Fleet. I like it. Offer me a job like that in a year or so—fine! But at present— --”

“Of course you’ll accept!” This was just obstinacy, almost wilful pigheadedness. It showed an unintelligent appreciation of the situation. And because it did, and because he was being continually assailed by other people’s opinions, unwillingly and unconsciously perhaps, but nevertheless there was a lowering of Manningham’s confidence in Gort, not only as a man but as a pilot.

Exasperated, he began leading the way off the lawn, back to the house. The garden was getting too dark in any case. It was difficult to see their way along the path to the lighted french window.

Behind him, he could hear Gort saying, “The way I see it, with the expansion across the Pacific . . . this job needs someone to advise the Company on runway lengths, alternates, holding and let-down procedures, meteorological landing and take off limits, what jets can and can’t do in hot temperatures . . . dozens of other things. Needs a man with a good deal more than a hundred hours’ jet experience . . . wouldn’t you say so, Edward?”

**I**4 He found the place, at last. He had been slowly cruising round Mayfair in the car, orbiting huge squares, squeezing through narrow roads, sailing past terraces of Georgian houses. Twice he stopped. People shook their heads. Finally, quite by chance he saw it, a sign on a wall that said *Palace Road*, and underneath, in smaller letters, *leading to Quiggan Square*. He turned into the triangle, saw the dusty trees in the garden, and opposite, the block of flats stamped with an unmistakable bright metal 2.

He parked the car, and went inside. Flat 6 was easy to find. There was an arrow on the wall of the stairs, pointing upwards. He stopped in front of the white-painted door with the polished brass knocker. Now he wished he hadn’t come. He looked down at his suit, straightened his tie, ran a hand over his hair.

While it was still upraised, the door suddenly opened. Charlotte stood—poised in the doorway, framed by the white lintels—all thick green silk and pale gold hair.

“Hello,” she said. Her lips were crooked in a faint smile as though pleased at having surprised him. “I saw your car from the window.”

She stepped back, raising her head in a little gesture of welcome. A heavy gilt bracelet slithered over her thin wrist. “Won’t you come in?”

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, feeling the soft give of the hall carpet under his feet. “But I just couldn’t find --”

“Quiggan Square?” She laughed. “I know.” The wide skirt of her frock lightly flicked him as she turned to lead the way into the lounge. He saw small tendrils of the severely caught-back hair just touching the high green collar at the back of her neck.

“Not many people *have* heard of it.” She was tossing the words behind her as she walked. “In any case I’m afraid father’s not here. He was called out at tea-time to do an air-test. This Duty Crew business.” She picked up a cushion from the sofa, plumped it, put it down again. “But he *oughtn’t* to be long.”

The room was large. A shaft of sunlight, coming into the room via the sky alley from Hyde Park, spotlighted an Azerbaijan stool. Dallas’ feet moved from polished wood blocks to Chinese rugs and back to wood again. He walked slowly, hearing the precise firm clipping of her heel, the contrasting whisper of her dress.

“Won’t you sit down? That chair behind you . . . I think you’ll find that the most comfortable.”

He stopped, and looking round him, reddened a little, his eyes taking in the carved pieces, the ivories, teaks, sandalwoods, the brilliant foreign fabrics, and the glittering chromium bar. “Nice place you’ve got here,” he said, all at once irritated with the room and himself and her for making him say it.

“We like it.” She was bending to pick up a cigarette box, and she turned her head to look at him. She might have posed herself like that especially for him to catch the flicker of



amusement in her eyes. Then it was gone, and she was standing in front of him with the box opened. "Cigarette?"

He took one. Striking a match, he held the flame in front of her face for a few seconds after her cigarette was lit. He saw her colour slightly; and because she turned away her head, he felt curiously triumphant.

"Drink?" she said. She walked over to the cocktail cabinet, and peered inside. "Still no brandy!" She gave rather a nervous laugh. "We had the Manningshams and their relations over to drinks . . . oh, ages ago now . . . and then I forgot the brandy."

He had followed her to the cabinet. "Got any beer? Yes, there! I can see it." He stretched out his arm. "Here . . . let me open it."

"And one for me, please."

As he leaned down to get the bottles and the glasses, she moved away to the marble mantelpiece. Half under her breath, she hummed—looking down at her feet, at her nails, and towards the window, not glancing at him once.

Walking towards her with a full glass in each hand, he could see fragments of the girl in gilt-framed mirrors. He wanted to say something about her looking beautiful, something slightly mocking to show that he realised she knew it. Instead, he put the beer down carefully on two silver coasters. Following her eyes to the window, he said, "Nice view you have."

"Not very." She lifted her glass. "Cheers!" She drank a little. "The houses opposite are a bit too high."

"You can see Hyde Park," he pointed out.

"A small portion of it . . . yes."

She sat down on the sofa. After a moment's hesitation, he perched himself on the edge of the chair opposite.

She watched him, a deceptive polite smile round her lips, like a kind mature hostess awaiting the remark of a backward guest. But he could think of no remark to make.

"Are you busy, Captain Dallas?"

"Fairly busy. Not much time to do anything."

She inclined her head. "Except the odd show now and again?" Her eyes were green and bland. And then, after a

pause, in that breathless way of talking, "I was so sorry about the other night." She sipped her beer, gazing into it fixedly.

But he was prepared for this. "So was I." He made it sound quite careless.

"Still——" She cradled her glass in both her hands. "So lucky you could" she smiled secretly "change the tickets." She drank, lowered her glass again, looked up at him innocently. "At such short notice."

"Wasn't it?"

"And did you enjoy the show?"

"Mm . . . quite good, I thought."

He waited for her to say, "And the girl . . . did she?" He was sure that the question was hovering there, waiting on the very red, very full lips.

Instead, he heard himself say, "And you . . . and your friend?"

"Oh, yes!" She clasped her hands around her knees, swinging herself dreamily from side to side. "We had a wonderful evening. Such fun!" A small and nostalgic sigh seemed to escape her. Alas, it said, not like tonight.

Dallas unconsciously tightened his mouth. Until now he had not been aware that he remembered much about that particular evening. Now he had a vision of Charlotte's escort. Large, well-fed, tailored, groomed.

"Your friend——" he began.

"Bill, you mean?" She put her hand on the switch beside her. Now the light from a small Japanese table lamp caught the glitter of her hair, the pale pearly sheen of her neck.

Dallas looked down in the lamplight at his own long thin hands. He had a sudden memory of Bill's plump white one holding Charlotte's elbow in the foyer.

"I was just going to say -- " But he could not remember what trivial remark it was going to be. "Looked very prosperous," he finished irritably.

She raised an eyebrow very slightly as if to emphasise his rudeness. But she murmured sweetly enough, "He is . . . quite."

There was a long pause. A car stopped somewhere near, and Charlotte raised her head, listening eagerly. Saved, her poised head said, father *at last*. But there was no step on the stair.

The French ormolu clock ticked. The faint murmur of the Cavanagh Crescent traffic sifted through deeps of glass and stone and concrete.

"What is he?" Dallas said carelessly. "Something in the city?" His voice was amused, lofty, ironic.

"Who? Are we still talking about Bill? No, he's a doctor."

"Is he the one you work for?"

She looked at him as though bewildered. "The one I . . . ? oh, *Bill!*" She threw back her head and laughed. "Good heavens, *no!* Dr. Dawes is *large*." She gestured an enormous distance with her hands, and smiled at him, inviting him to laugh with her. "Very fat and very married. They couldn't be more different."

The muted ringing of the telephone in the hall outside allowed her to look away. "Excuse me," she said, jumping up. "I won't be long." She moved across the room with a restrained expectant eagerness.

"Bill, perhaps," Dallas murmured drily, but she appeared not to hear him. Deliberately, it seemed, she left the door open. He heard her low breathless voice, and he held himself taut and still, trying to catch the words, or at least the tone.

The sharp click of the receiver returning to its cradle jerked him into life. He picked up a jade figure, composed himself to apparent absorption in the intricacies of its carving, tried to think of some casual light remark to make for her return.

Across the hall, he heard a door shut. Then silence again. He got up and moved around this strange room, touching a vase, a long-handled knife, scowling at a pale grey mask on the wall, breaking down the room's oppressive quality into separate jumbled items of ugliness.

He kept catching odd reflections of his face; but somehow they were almost unrecognisable, accusing as caricatures. He was suddenly impatient at himself, wandering around here, waiting for her to come back. He would make some excuse to go away. Then it struck him that even now she might be in her bedroom perhaps trying to think how to get rid of *him*.

When she stood in the doorway, he was still frowning. As she came towards him, he noticed that she had renewed her lip-

stick. He could smell fresh perfume as she came gracefully towards him.

"That was father. He's just got down. He's terribly sorry."

"That's all right." For the first time, the fact that they were alone together seemed of extraordinary importance. Irritation with her was swallowed up in a certain excitement. The atmosphere in the room subtly changed. Its oppressiveness acquired curious sultry undertones.

"Would you like to have supper now? It's cold. We can have it whenever you wish?" Her voice had gone a shade higher, sharper-edged.

"I'll wait. Much better to wait." It was a well-known smile he used: warm, admiring, slightly aggressive.

"He said he'd be about another hour. At least, let me get you another drink?"

He let her go and fill his glass, because her movements were pleasurable to watch. He had, too, a surge of triumph when she felt him looking at her, and he saw some of the cool composed peace go out of her eyes.

"Duty Crew's . bind, of course." He could not keep out of his voice a certain satisfaction.

"There!" She handed him the beer, smiling faintly.

She made a great business of settling herself in her chair, handing him the cigarettes, helping herself to one, sliding the ash-tray over to his part of the coffee table.

Their small movements momentarily disturbed the silence. And then it settled around them again, choking as dust.

Since Gort had phoned, the distance between them seemed to have widened. He searched his mind for some safe subject to bridge it. How did she like the Mannings? Very much. Silence again. Did she know many of the pilots? Only a few.

The clock gabbled the time away. Cars came and went quietly in the street below. Sooner or later, one of them would be Gort's. There would be steps on the stairs, and then the opportunity would be gone.

But for what? He didn't quite know. By rights, the evening presented him with the ordinary though unexpected challenge.

A deserted flat, a softly-lit room, a beautiful girl. He was doing nothing. He was being counted out. And yet —

He stared moodily into his beer, and when he looked up, he saw Charlotte staring across at him, mouth curled, eyes hard. He flushed.

It was suddenly important that he should put himself at rights with her.

Leaning forward and speaking quickly and urgently as though she might disappear or Gort might burst in, "Charlotte, I've never . . . we've never really had a chance to talk since that first time at the Inquiry. Remember?"

"I remember." Unhelpful. Cold.

"I'm sorry that I said so much." He gave her an encouraging smile, but he could not resist making it one of his best self-consciously charming ones.

"To me or to the Court?"

This time *his* mouth tightened. "What I said to *you* I'm sorry about. I didn't know you were George's daughter. So I apologise. What I said to the Court doesn't concern you."

"I think it does." She had swivelled round to face him. Her face was pink all over, dark red over her cheek-bones. Her eyes had narrowed and brightened.

"Then you think wrong." He deliberately drawled it, surprised now at the calm accuracy with which he could see how much he disliked her.

"There you go again! You *know*, of course. Like you knew at the Court." She stood up, throwing her head back furiously, clamping her hands together, trying to draw back her anger into decent polite composure.

And yet, not now to withdraw. She passed a hand over her forehead and let it drop to her side, in a strange hopeless little gesture. Dallas found himself oddly moved by it.

"You helped to get father blamed."

He made an irritable movement of dismissal. "He wasn't blamed."

"Who was, then?" She straightened up. "Who else? You, Captain Dallas? The Phoenix? The Company? Atlas Aviation?"

"Look." He ran his hands through his hair. "It was only brought in as a pilot error ---"

"Only!"

"Not negligence," he went on doggedly. "Which . . . yes, don't interrupt . . . it might well have been." He caught hold of her hand. Without passion, he gave it a little shake. "Just a moment! Let me finish! It means that in a situation that required quick judgment, your father didn't quite do the right thing. Nobody holds him *personally* to blame."

"But that's what everyone *does*. Oh, don't you see! You're not blind! Don't you know what it's really done to him? And it's not his fault. I *know*. He would always, *always* do the *right* thing!"

Because reluctantly, he was moved by her distress, he said roughly, "For God's sake, you're not a pilot! You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

She said in a low voice, "I think you all wanted father . . . not the Phoenix . . . to be blamed."

He stood up, slowly staring down at her contemptuously. Her face flushed a deeper red, but she stared back up at him unblinkingly.

"Now you *are* talking nonsense." For the first time, he began to feel at ease. In a little while, he would be master of the situation. He watched her tranquillity dissolve into fury. The sight gave him a curious painful sense of pleasure.

"After all," he pointed out objectively, "someone had to get *some* blame."

"And it wasn't going to be *you*, was it, Captain Dallas?" She looked up at him, and anger now seemed to have vitalised her beauty. It was as though the full and passionate mouth, so alien to the rest of her face, had taken over her whole personality. Her fine skin glowed with warmth. The big black pupils of her eyes had almost swallowed the rings of green iris.

"No, it wasn't going to be *me*." But he didn't hear himself say it. He didn't realise he'd said anything. His eyes kept coming back to that mouth, fascinated by its moist red fullness. Excitement thickened in his throat. He felt a curious light-headedness, like descending too fast and too steeply.

"I wonder you can come here——" she was saying, when he put his arm round her shoulders, pulling her face up to him, feeling for her mouth. He felt the tautness of her body against him, and he let his fingers dig into the flesh of her arms.

He was absorbed and obsessed by a sudden vivid sultry image that he had of her. His mouth covered hers. His skin touched the warm smoothness of her cheek, the softness of her hair. Without actually thinking of it, he was aware that she had stopped resisting him, that her lips were pressed against his own with a relaxed freshness. He felt suddenly tired, as though in this short space of time he had travelled immense distances, and in doing so had, without meaning to, arrived on a threshold, at once both sweet and fearful.

Now gently, he pushed her a little away from him. He said nothing—just looked down at her with a mixture of triumph and tenderness. For a fraction of a second, her mouth had been printed in the shape that he had made it. Her eyes had gone momentarily soft. Then she had flung herself away from him, was hurrying across the room, knocking against a teak table, a carved ebony chair, and reaching the door, had slammed it after her.

Throughout the flat now, there was silence. Nothing moved. No one seemed to breathe. The foreign furniture mutely protested against being so far from home.

Then faintly at first and then louder, Dallas heard a heavy step on the stairs, the sound of a key in the lock. The lounge door opened, and Gort came in, still wearing uniform, carrying his cap. "Hugh . . . I'm sorry. So sorry! You know what these blasted Duty Crews are. Maintenance kept us waiting—hour after hour!"

He looked around him. "Where's Charlotte?" Immediately his face showed concern to find a guest neglected, till the girl, cool and composed as ever, came back into the lounge. With a certain relief, he smiled and said, "Ah, there you are!" And then: "She has been looking after you, Hugh . . . I hope?"

Regardless, utterly unconcerned whether Captain Gort would

continue flying or would stay on the ground, along the long route to Singapore—from Rome, Cairo, Ranjibad, Calcutta—one after the other, the Phoenixes soared into the air, shimmered in the sunshine at fifty thousand feet, sped five times weekly east or west, and just as gracefully descended. Far out-stripping all other rivals on the Eastern Route, making them seem slow, almost unmoving in comparison—tortoises, just metal tortoises all of them—the Phoenix had already, within six months of operating, become a household word throughout the world. On huge bright Company posters, Africans, Indians, Arabians, Israeli shepherds tending their flocks, all stared up at the glittering speed of this bright star from the west.

Not that there was really any need of posters—almost a waste of money they were, just as advertisements were a waste of money, for every newspaper was glad to publish photographs of the Phoenix: “the most beautiful aeroplane that has ever been born” one air correspondent had called it—from every angle: taking off, landing, climbing, banking, gliding, turning, taxi-ing, even at a standstill. From many countries now, airline teams had come, keen to place their orders for the Phoenix, fighting each other for a place in the queue, anxious to get their hands on these pure jet airliners before they put their piston-engined fleets out of business.

For the loads on the Phoenix were getting even better. They were scooping up into their capacious cream-panelled passenger cabins an extra large slice of all traffic to the East. Even Ranjibad—financially the black spot on the route—appeared to be getting over the shock of that accident on its doorstep. Always anxious to try out something new, yet nervy of being used as paying guinea-pigs, the customers’ confidence was rising. Mr. Robinson’s campaign to promote the sale of tickets was paying off. He appeared to be winning the race to beat Judd’s axe, hitherto always so close to his white-duck tail. From a low of 60 per cent passenger capacity in the best season, he had climbed steadily up in the really hot weather, when loads before had always fallen off. So that even Judd appeared to be mellowing, mollified, almost satisfied with the way things were shaping; and he had been heard to say (great praise, this) that at long last the



chee-chee manager at Ranjibad seemed to be pulling up his socks.

The crews that flew the Phoenixes were still not numerous — a selected band, not a hundred altogether: twelve captains, rather more First Officers, fifteen Radio Officers, the same number of navigators, a baker's dozen each of stewards and stewardesses. They flew in an isolated atmosphere, high above the world, in air that could be said to be specially reserved for them. They rarely saw any other moving, living thing. They were left alone to the sun by day and the stars by night; sometimes in such wonderful visibility that the coast of England could be seen from half way up France.

But they practically never saw another aeroplane.

However, on the last day of Gort's Duty Crew, Captain Bateson saw one. He was up at cruising altitude over the Mediterranean, homebound from Cairo with ninety passengers. A cup of tea was in his left hand, and he was tuning the Alekko Range on the Radio Compass with his right, moodily staring out of the windscreen, when he saw what appeared to be a streak of silver lightning coming head on towards him.

Beside him, his First Officer cried, "Look out!"

Bateson slammed out the automatic pilot, swung immediately into the usual turn to the right decreed by regulations.

As he did so, he saw the thing beginning to turn to starboard, too—away from him. At least, he thought, it's humanly operated. There's a man in it somewhere. Two seconds later, he saw it was another Phoenix.

They passed quite close to each other, though the other jet was lower. Bateson, and his First Officer watched it flash by them.

"No Empire Airways markings," Bateson said. "Atlas one, eh?"

"Yes," said the First Officer.

"Blasted Company test pilot," the Captain grunted. "Not flying at his allotted altitude!"

"These altimeters," said the First Officer, in all fairness. "They're not so accurate . . . high up as this."

"What d'you mean?" Bateson growled back at him. "Trying to say we're not at our right height, are you?"

"Oh no, sir . . . no, sir . . . no!" said the First Officer hastily. There was a pause.

Then, in a more natural tone of voice, Bateson said, "Where the hell are they taking it?" The other aircraft had disappeared in the distance behind them, and once more he was giving what attention was left over from drinking his tea to tuning the Range.

"Khartoum, I believe," the First Officer said. "Some hot hole, anyway."

"How d'you know that?"

"Read it somewhere. Bit in the paper . . . about a week ago."

"I didn't see it."

"It was only a little bit."

"Say what they were going to do with it—when they'd got it out there?" He kept on twiddling the knob, listening in the one earphone that was over his left ear.

"Oh . . . not weather trials. Take-offs . . . landings. The usual sort of thing."

"For the Mark II . . . I suppose?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"Slack . . . this delay in delivery!" He gave a vicious swing to the knob. "Damn Range!"

Then he put the earphone over his right ear, and clamped both his hands over them, pressing them hard against his head. His eyes narrowed in concentration. "Dah Dit Dah . . . Dah Dah," he said, with a smile coming over his face. "KM . . . Alekko Range. We can start our descent, at last!"

**15** She sat on the galley table, her blue uniform skirt pulled nicely over her crossed knees. "Alex," she was saying to the steward who stood by the stove, his left hand on his hip, "you're wrong! Quite wrong! Utterly, utterly wrong!"

He grinned up at her, half amused, half malicious. "I'm not, you know."

"You *are*, you know."

"I'm not, you know," he repeated.

"It's Creighton," she said. "They told me it was Creighton."

"Went sick. Late last night. Hell of a flap."

"Couldn't they ask someone else?"

The steward shrugged. "Whenever there's a panic . . . they always ask him."

Joyce Mitchell's pale oval face had gone quite pink. "Alex . . . you're teasing! He's on Duty Crew."

"Not now." The grin widened, went more malicious than ever. "Cross my heart!"

"Now I *know* you're teasing." Her eyes looked at him, big and moist. She tossed back her head. "You're pulling my leg."

He reached out his hand, and putting it over her neat ankle, gave it a gentle tug. "Only in that way." And then, leaning over the chromium sink, looking out of the porthole: "Oh hell! I hate these last-minute delays! Especially with the customers all on board."

"What is it . . . d'you know?"

"The usual . . . I expect. Bloody mail's late arriving again."

"Traffic should take the bods back to the waiting-room."

"Not Traffic! Too damn glad to get rid of 'em! Won't be in any hurry to take 'em back!"

"Such an *awful* advertisement . . . stuck here for everyone to see!"

The steward said nothing. He was still bending down, peering out of the porthole at the busy London ramp around them. Propellers turning, piston-engined aircraft came and went around them. Unwilling to change her position, Miss Mitchell gazed disconsolately around her. The galley on the Phoenix was just aft of the Flight Deck on the starboard side, on the port side, directly opposite the sitting girl, was the crew rest compartment, composed of two seats that could be made into bunks. Almost the only grumble that the pilots had about the Phoenix was that there was no partition between, and they were continually assailed as they rested by the smell of food. The door to the cockpit was open, and showed it empty: the door to the passenger cabin was closed.

"Any sign of their lordships?" she asked. And when he shook his head: "Have you noticed . . . when there's a delay . . . how quickly the operating crew melt away?"

"Have I!"

"How about the customers, by the way?"

Reluctantly, the steward left the window, walked over to the closed door, opened it a few inches, and peeped aft. "Getting a bit restless," he said as he returned. "About time you went round with a change of magazines!"

"Can't *you*, Alex?"

"Your job."

She let her head fall slightly sideways. Her long lashes twinkled at him, "Please, Alex. *Please!*" She indicated her position. "I'm so comfortable."

He looked at her for a moment, before saying grudgingly, "Oh, all right!" He paused. "Though I should know better! They told me at the Section . . . watch out for Mitchell! Except when the Captain's around . . . she'll get you doing everything!"

"Well . . . isn't that what men are for? To *do* things?"

The steward went over to the pile of magazines on the shelf, picked them up, and smilingly muttering, "I'll do *you*," he was half-way through to the passenger cabin, when again she harped back to the old question: "It's Creighton, isn't it?"

"Wait and see!"

He disappeared. Through the now open door, she could hear his voice: "Would you like another magazine, madam? *Punch?* *The Sketch?*" No, sir . . . not long now ----"

Still sitting on the table, she moved her right leg up and down, humming to herself. Her teeth bit into the lip-sticked skin of her mouth. She was certain . . . well, almost certain. The crews were always kidding the stewardess. She bent her head to look at the bright tips of her shoes and momentarily, in the V of her monkey jacket she caught the gleam of the little gold Phoenix she still wore on her shirt. Her smooth forehead furrowed. She frowned at it in distaste. Normally of course, it was well out of sight. She hated it really: it was only there to keep her tie in place. All the same, in one vivid flash, it brought back the whole humiliating business—

The steward had returned. "Still no sign of the operating crew?"

"Not that I can see."

"Not exactly breaking your neck looking . . . are you?"

And when she said nothing, dumping the magazines on the shelf, he grinned and said, "I suppose you'd really like it to be Hugh Dallas?"

She made a kind of mysterious sound between her compressed lips. "Mmm."

"Haven't been seeing so much of him lately, have you?"

"Mmm."

"Or have you got someone else?"

"Mmm."

"Or mind my own business, eh?" He laughed. "Oh well, don't blame you . . . the gossip that goes on in this racket!" And he started to potter round the galley, moving this, checking that, till he saw a Company Crew raincoat on the rest compartment seat opposite. He walked over to collect it to put in the vestibule.

"There you are, you see!" he said, holding up the name tag towards her. "Proof! *G. Gort.*"

He had not expected the effect it would have on her. She went almost white, her face suddenly quite frightened. With an effort, he saw her take hold of herself, the small teeth coming out to bite her lips hard again.

"He's all right," he said. "Don't worry!"

"The only time I ever pray," she had begun, and was going on in an exaggeratedly high voice: "Just before I look at the roster"—when the door to the passenger cabin began to open.

It opened wider, and a large figure came in just as she was saying, "I pray . . . please, God, *please* don't send me out with Captain Gort!"

George Gort's blue eyes regarded his catering crew mildly. He stood there, taking in the steward holding his coat, the girl perched on the table. He nodded. "Morning, Mr. Minty . . . Miss Mitchell." And then he had gone, up into the Flight Deck, had disappeared, closing the door behind him.

The steward hissed across at the stewardess. "He heard you!"

She tossed her head again. "He didn't!"

"He did, you know."

"He *didn't*, you know."

The rest of the crew came aboard. The Australian, Captain Braddock, was supernumerary. One by one, the jets started. The Phoenix took off, climbed to cruising altitude, set course for Rome. The steward noticed, however, that no matter what she said, Miss Mitchell was showing a marked reluctance to go forward. It was really the stewardess' job to take tea and light refreshments up to the operating crew, but whenever a trip to the Flight Deck was needed, she contrived to be "too busy" with the passengers.

It was not till after leaving Rome and they were well on the way to Cairo that Gort remarked to the steward, "Haven't seen much of the stewardess on this trip, Mr. Minty."

"Oh, sir," he said, shifting his shoulders a little. "She's around, sir."

"Good," Gort said. "Then tell her I'd like to have a word with her, would you?"

Five minutes later, she was standing just beside him, on his right-hand side, close to the throttle box. "You wanted me, sir?"

He turned his head. He had, as a matter of fact, heard the remark, and having mulled it over in his mind, had decided that he should do something about it, and that the best way was to laugh it off quite openly as Dallas or Bateson would have done, make some crack (he had in fact prepared something) about the rigours of the roster.

But now he saw a girl not much older than his daughter—pretty, too, but with red-brown hair, not blonde. Wide-eyed, pale, looking rather scared.

"Miss Mitchell— -" he began

And stopped. He had forgotten the quip. He could not remember the words. He had never in any case quite got used to this skirted crew-member who had only made her appearance during the past few years of his third of a flying century.

Just outside, the jets whistled quietly to themselves. Far below them, the Mediterranean glittered in the sunshine. In the right-hand seat, Braddock stretched out his left arm, and

moved the Phoenix three degrees to starboard on the automatic pilot.

"I'm a bit thirsty, Miss Mitchell," Gort said at last. "I wonder . . . would you be so good as to bring me a cup of coffee?"

When he opened the door, the huge lounge looked empty. Diamond-dropped chandeliers blazed away at a vacant stretch of thick pile carpet. As always here, there was a drowsily sweet smell, left behind by vases of tropical flowers, now removed by the Sikh stewards.

Then a head appeared from behind the deep wings of an arm-chair, over by the far window. A voice said affably, "Hello, George!"

Captain Gort nodded, grunted, stood there staring across the whole length of the room at Captain Judd.

"Surprised to see me?" The Flight Captain had got up, was walking over towards him. "Well . . . I'm surprised to see you, too. Thought it was Creighton."

"He went sick. They were a bit stuck."

"So they asked you? Always seem to ask you, don't they? *Noblesse oblige!*"

"Only meant going out a couple of days earlier."

"Nice to see you, anyway. Good trip?"

"Very good."

"Tired . . . I expect?"

Gort said stiffly, "No more tired than anyone else would be at this time in the morning, after flying four thousand miles."

"All right . . . all right, George!" They were standing side by side now, an odd pair of Englishmen in this oriental hotel: Gort in blue serge uniform, Judd in a lightweight suit not far off the colour of his hair. "Just thought you weren't looking your usual cheerful self."

A rather strained silence descended, broken only by the creaking of the three-bladed fans on the ceiling as lethargically they stirred the hot air beneath them. Then Gort said politely, "Been in Ranjibad long?"

"Came yesterday. With Leyland."

Mindful how—very much more than the average Flight Captain—Judd liked to have his finger in the pie of the Fleet's commercial affairs, Gort asked, "Come about some contract or other . . . have you?"

"No." Judd smoothed down his sleek fair hair and sighed. "I'm on this Route Checking business."

"What business," said Gort, "is that?"

"A new bug in the official bonnet." Judd smiled sadly. "I have to make sure that the boys down the Line are flying according to the Book."

"Oh," said Gort.

"Leyland's all right. Nice pilot. Nice pair of hands on Leyland."

"I didn't know that you had any instructional experience," said Gort.

Rather coldly Judd said, "I'm not *instructing*."

Gort shrugged his shoulders. Then slowly, he asked: "Staying here long?"

"Well . . . I was going to leave Tuesday. But now I might as well make it tomorrow."

"Going west? Going home?"

Judd shook his head regretfully. "East." He lifted his left hand and casually studied his nails. "I'll be coming with you, George."

Gort said immediately, "But I've already got Braddock with me."

"Whatever's he doing on your crew?"

"Apparently Atlas are being a bit awkward——"

"They just want any available aircraft for trials," Judd put in quickly. "Can't blame them for that."

"Well, what *are* they testing?"

"Testing?" Judd raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I expect Pickering's got some new ideas for the Mark II. You know what a perfectionist he is."

"Well"—Gort shrugged his heavy shoulders—"whatever it is . . . Dallas hasn't any training aircraft. That's why Braddock's with me. For Route experience." He paused. "So you'd better stick to Tuesday, Judd. We haven't really the room for another supernumerary."



"I won't be coming supernumerary. I'll be coming as the Route Inspector."

"Oh," said Gort. "Inspecting me, eh?"

Judd looked at him and laughed. "Don't glare at me as though I'm the Gestapo, George! Nothing to it!"

Gort still regarded him with an unsmiling face. Then he said, "Well . . . I'm off to bed. Night, Judd."

"Night, old chap. Oh, and George, this business——" he called to the bulky blue figure disappearing through the door. "Pure formality for you. We'll have a good yarn together. Then you can buy me a beer in Singapore!"

Certainly, twenty-four hours later, that seemed to be the programme. In the Commander's taxi to the airport—shared by Captains Judd, Gort and Braddock—the newly appointed Route Inspector could hardly have been more friendly. As for his duties—he seemed to be interpreting them in a very elastic way. "By the way, George," he said, as the car slid through the hot drizzly night, "I wonder . . . would you mind if I did the take-off? With all this administrative work, I haven't been getting much practise lately."

"If you want to," Gort said.

And at the airport, it was: "This is Captain Gort's flight, ask Captain Gort," to everyone who came up with queries. He kept silent at Met briefing while Gort asked the questions. When the eastbound aircraft arrived, he kept in the background while the incoming captain discussed the aircraft—"Number Three engine surging a little, nothing much"—and the weather over Ranjibad—"Pretty stinking low down, but you get out of it at nine thousand." The only thing Judd did was to calculate the unstick speed from the graph—they were heavy for a Ranjibad eastbound—as 114 knots.

He and Gort and the Station Manager walked through the rain towards the waiting aircraft.

"Thirty-five embarking here, sir," said Mr. Robinson with pride. "Business is stepping up."

"Wait till you give us a full load!" Judd snapped. "Then you *will* have something to shout about!"

Somewhat crestfallen, Robinson departed at the steps. As

they climbed aboard, Gort suggested that the Manager was "doing all right".

"Only way to get the best out of 'em, George! Slap 'em down!"

In the cabin, Miss Mitchell—a cool vision in a white cotton jacket, a blue gaberdine skirt and gossamer-thin nylons, respectfully greeted them and took their raincoats. Then they went forward just as the first of the passengers came clattering up the steps.

Since the only seats up front were occupied by the four crew, Gort and Braddock sat in the rest compartment, and strapped themselves in for the take-off.

As the jets roared up to full power and the Phoenix began to move, Braddock pressed his face against the porthole, peering out into the night.

Not that he could see much: a long expanse of wet wing underneath them vibrating as the speed built up, with a cherry-red navigation light at the tip of it.

"Dark," suggested the Australian.

Gort nodded. Then he sat with his arms folded, quite still, unmoving, only his lips compressed a little tighter than usual, listening to the pounding of the wheels along this same runway, waiting—waiting—waiting for the moment they left the ground.

"Mind if I stay up front to watch the landing?"

The three-hour flight had gone perfectly well, perfectly smoothly. Though Gort had not said much—he never did on the Flight Deck—Judd had remained remarkably talkative and amiable, the conversation largely consisting of his (and the President's) plans to extend the Phoenix route eventually across the Pacific. Sitting in the second pilot's seat, not once had he criticised any action Gort had taken. Now, on the descent to Calcutta through rain-filled cloud, he took his eyes away from the dark windscreen and smiled at the Australian standing by the throttle box. "Do!" he smiled cordially. "Good idea!" He turned to the navigator behind him, "Mr. Williams . . . would you please let Captain Braddock have your seat?"

Mr. Williams left the Flight Deck to join the First Officer in

the rest compartment. Braddock sat down. He glanced at the jet pipe temperatures: 550 degrees C., a little hotter than usual. Then he looked across at the needle of the radio compass, watched it wavering a little as it pointed at the beacon on which Gort was letting down.

They broke cloud at 2500 feet. There—over on the starboard bow, the light of the airport shone up at them muzzily, through the rain. Over the R/T, the Tower came up in sing-song Indian-English: "Victor Mike . . . altimeter 1006 millebars . . . visibility two miles in rain . . . wind north-west seventeen . . . runway 33."

Judd acknowledged it laconically enough. Then he said in what seemed to Braddock a warning kind of voice: "33's the short one."

"I know," said Gort.

"Ever landed on it before?"

"No."

"Wouldn't you prefer the long one?"

Gort shook his head. "Too much cross-wind"

"Runway 33's very short—"

Something in the way he said it made Braddock lean forward to get a better view of the Flight Captain's face. In the ghostly green light from the instruments, he saw the skin round Judd's eyes crinkle up in anxious concentration. His long fingers were drumming nervously on the control column in front of him.

It flashed through the Australian's mind that Judd was convinced Gort would overshoot on the short runway: his own small experience had already drilled into him how much faster than a piston-engined aircraft a jet landed, and how much longer after touchdown—without the drag of idling propellers—it took to slow up and stop.

"Only 1600 yards!" Judd went on. "Not long for a Phoenix!"

Gort banked the aircraft to the right, took up a course of 165 degrees, the reciprocal of the runway. He seemed unconcerned. "With this wind . . . long enough," he said.

To Braddock, it seemed that Judd was on the point of continuing the argument. "I think——" he began. And then he stopped. *He doesn't trust him*, the Australian thought to himself, *he's not certain what he should do.*

Outside, the jets whined. Raindrops were pattering softly against the windscreen.

"Field Approach Check," said Gort.

With an effort, Judd seemed to put himself back under his usual iron control. "Well . . . O.K." He gave rather a mirthless laugh. "You're the Captain," and he began rattling off the sixteen items of the Check like a mechanical robot.

Four minutes later—wheels down, all checks complete, cleared final, cleared to land—from nine hundred feet they slowly descended in a straight line downwards. Three miles away, looking from this position inclined towards each other, Runway 33's two lines of small yellow lights gave them a moist welcome.

"You're too high," Judd said. As usual for the second pilot, he had his hands on the throttle levers, ready to give the captain the power he called for. Now, as Braddock watched him, he started to draw them back. "How about 8000 r.p.m.?"

"8000 r.p.m.," Gort said.

The Phoenix came lower. At 700 feet, it began to be rougher. The wipers noisily fanned the rain away from the windscreen.

"You're too fast!" Braddock could see that Judd's hands on the throttles could hardly keep still: they were moving the levers back further.

"7000 r.p.m.," Gort said.

"Still too high!" Judd's voice had gone quite shrill with irritation. "Runway's *short* . . . don't forget!"

But Gort did not call out for a reduction of power this time.

"Didn't you *hear*?" Judd demanded. His fidgeting hand found a moment's peace on the flap lever. "Shall I give you 80 per cent flap?"

"Not yet," Gort said—but it was already down.

The Phoenix passed 500 feet, 400 feet. The runway lights slowly drew away from each other, became more and more parallel. Down here, the wind was stronger. It was raining harder.

"Get your speed down!" Judd urged. "6000 . . . 6000!"

Gort said quietly, "6000 r.p.m.!" And then: "Landing lights on!"

Judd's left hand went to the switch. The waterlogged air in

front of the windscreen suddenly seemed to catch fire. Shimmering wet, it glared back at them, molten and dazzling.

"I can't see!" Gort cried. "Switch 'em off!"

The air went dark again. The feeble runway lights came back into their own. The altimeter swung past 200 feet.

"7000 r.p.m.," Gort said. .

"Increasing power are you?"

"8000 r.p.m."

And then, seconds after the levers went forward, "9000 r.p.m.!"

As he put the power on, Judd warned, "Not too fast!"

The aircraft suddenly sank. Out of the darkness, the runway seemed to rise up to meet them. The distance between the lights widened. Then the first two flashed by the wings.

The nose went up. Softly and gently, the wheels touched. As they slowed down, Judd said, "Nice landing! Bit low on the approach, though."

"From your running commentary," Gort said shortly, "I got the opposite idea. I was lower than usual . . . but we were all right."

The taxied to the ramp in silence. Gort shut down the engines. The passengers were taken off to the restaurant. Judd disappeared to hurry the ground crew with the refuelling.

Gort and Braddock were walking through the rain together, towards Operations, when the Flight Captain caught them up. He held in his hand what looked like a shoot of thorns. He waved it at them.

"We weren't all right! They found this stuff round the port wheel." In the bright neon lights of the ramp, the Australian saw the concern on Judd's face. "Looks like we hit the hedge, coming in!"

**16** "Just a minute, Miss . . . Miss——"  
Half way through the wide doors of the dining-room, she stopped; turned; smiled; said meekly, "Mitchell, Captain Judd. Joyce Mitchell."

"Yes, of course!" He put his hand up to his forehead. "I'm afraid I've got a few things on my mind."

"A few things!" The indigo blue eyes looked up at him—earnestly, sympathetically. "You must have lots and *lots* . . ."

They were westbound again now, in the Imperial Hotel at Ranjibad. Captain Gort's crew they still remained—on all the ship's papers, in chalk on all the boards along the route. But the Route Inspector was also with them—had made no effort to get off the aircraft at Singapore (as might have been expected) to check the operation of another crew. What his further intentions were—they were scheduled to take off for England tomorrow night—remained as mysterious as his future plans.

After the incident at Calcutta, there were several courses of action Judd might have taken. The most usual one would have been to wire all details to the Management and suggest the suspension of Captain Gort. Or he might have taken over command himself.

But no! Immediately he had said his say, had produced his botanical bunch of evidence, he appeared to forget all about it. He suggested—in the interests of the Fleet, no other reason—that Braddock should be given the maximum amount of flying practice possible. Would George mind?

Apparently he did not. Anyway, he said nothing against it. In fact, he hardly said anything to anyone. While Braddock and Judd sat up front doing the flying, Gort sat in the rest compartment: eating his meals, reading the *Calcutta Times*, then the *Singapore Herald*, talking to the First Officer or just staring out of the porthole. At their nightstop at the Hotel, he had lunch and dinner later than most other members of the crew, had gone to bed earlier. Since arriving at Ranjibad, nobody had seen much of him: though the Radio Officer had met him, had had a few words with him, shopping in the market behind Dhammaratu Road.

On the other hand, Judd—as now, his fair head towering above the darker one of the stewardess—was very much in the limelight.

"I wouldn't say as many as *that*," he said. And then, eyes

screwed up in that shrewd scrutiny of his: "We went out here before . . . didn't we?"

"Four months ago, Captain Judd. Four months . . . and two days."

"I remember. Well, we're going out again tonight."

"Good," she said. "That'll be lovely!"

"Meet here"—they were standing on the vast mosaic pattern of the hall—"at eight sharp. Make yourself nice and pretty in a cocktail dress, eh?"

She went quite pink with pleasure, too overcome apparently, to answer.

"Got one with you, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! A black one with a——"

"That'll do," he said.

"If we'll be dancing, I'll wear my shoes with the very——"

"No dancing", he said. "Unless Strickland wants to. And I don't suppose he will."

She paused. She faltered. "Strickland?" she asked.

"Boss of Sind Airways. On the brink of buying Phoenixes."

"Oh!" Uncertainly her fingers went up to twist the jade beads round her neck. "Then you want me to——"

"Same set-up. You talk to Mrs. while I talk to Mr." He showed his white teeth in a scimitar-shaped smile. "Last time . . . I remember . . . you did it rather well . . ."

This time, she did it even better. Though there was a dance on the patio, wouldn't it be better, she had said—assured, very air-hostess-like, getting as reward the slightest nod of approval from Judd—to sit in the lounge bar where they could hear themselves *talk*? There, she had flashed at Mr. Strickland the correct wattage of wide-eyed admiration. Then she settled herself down, a martini in her hand, to listen—rapt—to Mrs. Strickland's conversation. Only her foot moved—her left foot in a little black high-heeled shoe—up-and-down, up-and-down in time to the music that leaked in from the patio.

Just on eleven, the Stricklands left, after effusive goodbyes. Judd seemed pleased. Very pleased. He ordered another round. "Just for the road." But when the drinks came, he put the glass in her hand and said, "Present for a good girl!"

He leaned forward. "Went well . . . Joyce, isn't it? Thank you."

Slightly mocking, impertinent enough to be interesting: "A pleasure, Clive."

After the initial shock of surprise, Judd leaned forward even further. He went so far as to smile. "You know, I've been thinking," he said, "you and I, we do these things rather well." "I've been thinking that, too."

"Expect the crews take you out quite a bit?"

Over the rim of her raised glass, the huge eyes seemed to be studying him deliberately. "Not much. You see"--perhaps it was an explanation, lest he got the wrong idea—"in Rānjibad and Singapore . . . usually there's so little time"

"But you have a good time down the Route?" His voice sounded anxious. Apparently so casual, just friendly interest, momentarily the conversation had touched the electric skin of Judd's obsession: a young, healthy, contented crew multiplied by the Phoenix equalled an efficient operation.

She pursed her bright red lips in an expression of thoughtful doubt. "Well . . ."

"Our crews have the best rooms in the best hotels."

"Oh, the rooms are all right."

"Whenever I manage to find the time to fit in a trip . . . I find the food good."

"The food's fine."

"Legs aren't too long . . . are they?"

"Sometimes, I think they're too short."

"You get enough rest . . . in between trips?" He went on with his questions, getting the correct answer to each of them, but still not getting the sum right. And then it suddenly struck him - the feminine factor that was so variable it threw out all man-made calculations - and he said, giving up rather irritably: "Anyway, I expect you'll be getting married one day soon."

She blushed. The colour flooded up her neck, into her face, making it even prettier than before.

"Oh I see! I see!" He was pleased with his own perspicacity. "So you're engaged already!"

"Oh, no! No! I'm not! Nothing like that!"



Such powerful denials only made him positive. "But you will be soon."

She said nothing. She had turned her face away from him now, was softly humming to herself the waltz they were dancing in the patio. Hearing her, seeing her foot still keeping time to the music, Judd became suddenly conscious that (apart from the barman) they were the only people in the lounge, and quickly he said, "I'm sorry . . . but I'm not a dancing man."

"I don't want to dance." Her head had gone lower. He still could not see her face. Her voice went so low, it was almost a whisper: telling a secret, perhaps, not to him, but to the table: "The last time I was here . . . we danced."

Puzzled, he said: "*We*?"

"Not you, Clive." He could hardly hear the next words: "I don't ever want to dance here again!"

"Oh," he said. "What's the matter with the place?"

"It isn't the place." She looked up at him now. The flush had faded. Icily cold, she said, "It was the person."

"The person you were with?"

She nodded.

"One of the crew?"

She nodded again.

"Pilot?"

"The Captain. Captain Dallas."

"Oh . . . Hugh Dallas, eh?" He remembered now hearing some story of Dallas' name being linked with one of the stewardesses. It had not made any special impact upon him. He could not understand it, had rather despised him for it: a man who might get quite far in the aviation business, if he kept in the running and out of such distractions. "You go out quite a lot with him, don't you?"

"I did . . . till that night."

"Oh." Obviously, there'd been some trouble here. Dallas, apparently, had got under the net and out. That was Dallas' business. He could not see that there was any connection with either himself or the Phoenix. He became rather uncomfortable. It was more than he had bargained for. This girl had been detailed to do a job of work tonight, and she'd done it quite

well. That being so, an extra drink and a few kind words were only right and proper.

But this damp—yes, it was damp, he could see the indigo eyes were swimming—finale was quite out of place, quite out of the programme. He was not used to being at the receiving end of girlish confidences. He had no intention of exploring any further down that wet road. He pulled back his sleeve, and looked at his watch. Abruptly he said, "We better get mobile!"

As though galvanised into action, she picked up her almost untouched martini.

"No need to gulp it," he said. And then, harking back to the original subject, the only subject, the subject that before had brought with it such an unfortunate climax, he began again with: "But you're quite happy . . . flying on the Phoenixes, aren't you?"

She seemed more composed now. Perhaps it was his sympathy. Perhaps it was the drink. In a more normal voice she said, "Well . . . that rather depends on the Captain."

He saw that she was trying to twist the conversation round a hundred and eighty degrees. Rather irritably, he kept them on the present course with, "I mean in the air."

"I mean in the air, too."

Even more irritably "Dallas is all right. Nice pair of hands on Dallas."

She said quite sharply, "Who's talking about Dallas?" Then she became confused. Her eyes dropped again. She seemed hardly to be knowing what she was saying. "I mean . . . I'm glad . . . that you —"

"Me?"

"I'm glad that you came along with us on this trip."

"Oh?" He looked at her more kindly. "Any special reason?"

"Because . . . I shouldn't say this, I know"—she started to fiddle with a gold bangle she was wearing on her thin left wrist—"but it's because Captain Gort isn't doing the flying."

His fair eyebrows drew themselves nearer together. Somebody—Braddock probably—had told the girl about hitting the hedge. Crew gossiping was bad enough but you also never

knew where these stories ended. Judd knew perfectly well—whatever his private feelings and sympathies—where his public duty to the Fleet lay. Very coldly, he warned her, "Because Captain Gort happened to have an accident . . . stewardesses shouldn't jump to conclusions about his flying."

Defiantly she said, "I didn't jump to any conclusions. I put two and two together."

"And made five." Judd had become suddenly very conscious of being the Flight Captain. "Come on! If you don't want that drink, leave it."

"I *do* want it." And then softly, reproachfully, tears not far off again, "There's no need to be so angry. You see, before *you* came with us . . . I was . . . well, I'll be quite truthful. I was *frightened*."

"Why? Did something happen on the London-Ranjibad sector?"

She finished off her drink. She shook her head.

"Well then . . . what's all the fuss about?"

"I just have a feeling . . . when Captain Gort's flying . . . that something's going to . . . happen."

"Then you can forget it. It won't."

"But after that accident, how d'you *know* it won't?"

"Because Captain Gort had a very thorough Check before coming back on the Line."

There was a long pause. Then she said: "Captain Dallas gave it to him, didn't he?"

"Of course."

She leaned right across the table. "*Then he didn't!*"

Judd said roughly, "What d'you mean?"

"He didn't have a thorough Check."

"How d'you know? Check pilot, are you? You weren't even on the aircraft!"

He noticed that her hands on the table were shaking. Her whole body was trembling. Tears had begun to fall down her cheeks. "He couldn't fail him," she said. "He *couldn't* fail Captain Gort."

"Why not?"

"Because —"

She stopped. She was fumbling in her bag for a small lace handkerchief. She buried her nose in it. Sniffing a little, she said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be going on like this." She started to collect her things about her as though for a move. "I think we should go."

But Judd stayed where he was. He was interested. It began to dawn on his mind that the two topics of conversation since the departure of the Stricklands had certain connections. More than that, they had something to do with the problem that had been uppermost in his mind for the past three weeks. No matter his official position, this was a time to extract inside information that would otherwise be denied to him. He had no great well of sympathy, but he stirred up what he had and put all of it into his voice as he asked, "Because what, Joyce?"

"Because of the daughter! There's a blonde daughter!" The words came out with a sudden stark anger. "How can Dallas fail Captain Gort . . . when he's so struck on his daughter?"

"Struck?" Judd knew Gort had a daughter. That was all. "How d'you know?"

"I've seen her! I've seen them together! And he's always going round to the Gorts!"

He studied her carefully. He said what soothing words he could think of to her, while behind the mask of his face, his calculating machine had started to tick over. He was impressed with her sincerity: the story had the mark of truth on it. There could be no doubt that Dallas had treated her shabbily. Apparently she had been superseded by the Gort girl. No wonder she was so bitter. Such a pretty girl, too! The timing seemed about right. The story certainly explained Dallas' intransigent attitude that he had found so unfortunate.

"Anyhow," he said finally, "don't worry about the trip to England tomorrow. Because I shall be coming with you."

Those words seemed to comfort her. She became much more in possession of herself. The moisture dried up in her eyes. The bright red lipsticked mouth even managed a pale smile at him, as he helped her--a most unusual gallantry for Judd--into the taxi for the hotel.

Back in his room, he undressed carefully, folded his clothes

with an almost clinical neatness. He walked over to the dressing table, and stood in front of the mirror, thinking of the extraordinary disclosures of the evening.

He had never liked Dallas, but he had never really doubted his general competence and trustworthiness. That he could make mistakes—yes, of course. Unlike himself, the man wasn't a 100 per cent dedicated to his job. The ordinary Line pilots, even, gave the impression of more loyal devotion to the Phoenix than the Training Captain. Several times, he'd heard Dallas say he'd like this or that changed, would prefer that or this to be different in their crack jet airliner.

But never had he suspected anything like this.

His thin lips curled in contempt for a man who could so be twisted round a female finger. Then he lifted his brief-case off the glass top of the dressing table. Opening the brass catch, he took out the bundle of dry stalks, wrapped in newspaper, that he was preserving for a passage to England.

He looked at it. He shook his fair head, wiser now in its new-found knowledge of the ways of men. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

They arrived at London Airport in Phoenix Victor Mike with 79 passengers on a wet Saturday morning - after an excellent trip.

Captain Judd could not have been more charming or more amiable. He took off from Ranjibad, Braddock did the landing at Cairo. But after that, Captain Gort did all the flying, with the Flight Captain beside him in the right-hand seat.

Now, Gort seemed considerably more cheerful. He became almost talkative on the Flight Deck. He reminisced. Judd listened politely. Only once was there the remotest sign of disagreement between the two of them, sitting up there in the nose of the Phoenix, when just before the let-down to London through grey wet cloud, Gort said gruffly, "I wasn't all *that* low . . . coming into Calcutta."

Judd could afford an indulgent smile. He had decided that he had no real quarrel with Gort. The man had put up a good

show over that explosive decompression. More than that—for the reputation of the Phoenix—he had kept decently dark. He just wasn't a Phoenix pilot, that was all. Probably rather too old. Like all his breed, he would, of course, swear black was white. Tactfully slurring his words, the Flight Captain murmured, "Well, George . . . I wouldn't say you were, only —"

"That stuff on the wheel? Can't understand how it got there! You know, I've been thinking—"

Then London came up on the R T peremptorily ordering them to descend to 11,000 feet. They were held on the Epsom Range. Half an hour later, through the driving rain, Gort brought the Phoenix down to make what is (for some unaccountable reason) the sweetest and most prideful essence of a pilot's life: a silk-soft landing on the wet surface of the home runway.

After Customs, the crew as usual went over to Operations to collect their mail and to look at the roster. From over by the alphabetical cubby-holes, where he was sorting through the Bs, in a friendly sort of way Braddock called out, "When are you out again, Gort?"

"Not till Tuesday week."

"Nice long time in."

Gort wrinkled up his nose. "Too long," he said.

**I**7 "Captain Manningham . . . if it's convenient, Captain Judd wants to see you for a moment."

The Fleet Superintendent looked up in surprise from the report he was reading. He had known perfectly well that Victor Mike was being brought into London by Captain Gort on Saturday, because in the normal way the Commander's name had been signalled to the stations along the route, together with his departure time ex-Ranjibad. He presumed—now it was 10 a.m. on Monday—that it had arrived, since he would have been told if there had been any delay. But he had imagined the new Route Inspector was still kicking around somewhere in Asia.

"Judd?" he said. "Oh." And then: "Well . . . all right."

A moment later, through the open door came the Route Inspector in a lounge suit, his hair beautifully parted and his face suitably grave, carrying his brief-case.

"Hello, Edward."

"Hello, Clive. Take a seat."

Carefully hitching up his trousers, Judd sat in the chair on the other side of the Superintendent's desk. He put one leg over the other, showing an expanse of green and beige Argyle sock between his suède shoes and his blue turn-ups.

"Back early, aren't you?" inquired Manningham.

Judd's eyes looked at him significantly. "I expect you can guess why."

"In this job . . . I gave up guessing a long time ago."

"You knew I went out to check pilot operation on the Route?"

"So you told me."

"Well . . . first, I checked Leyland." He paused. "Very good."

"I'm glad."

"Next . . . I checked Gort." He paused again a longer pause this time. "Unsatisfactory . . . I'm afraid"

Manningham said evenly, "In what way?"

Judd shrugged his shoulders. "Generally unsatisfactory."

"*That* doesn't tell us much, does it? Can't you be more specific?"

Judd kept silent. He appeared to be deliberating. When he did speak, it was as though he regretted having to say this: "He came in too low at Calcutta. Dangerously low."

"So you feel he should be suspended?"

Judd hesitated. "Well . . . of course, that's for *you* to say, Edward. Your pigeon. I wouldn't want to . . ."

What he wouldn't want to do must have been unsuitable for polite conversation, for he stopped dead, and waited for Manningham to say something.

The Fleet Superintendent leaned back in his chair. He put his left hand up to his face, squeezed what spare flesh there was round his eyes, and said, "Oh, God!"

By that expression, he meant to convey his exasperation with a problem that instead of being finished and done with a couple of weeks ago, was instead getting bigger and more unmanageable. Then he picked up the telephone, and got on to Operations.

"When's Captain Gort going out again?" he asked.

"A week tomorrow, sir."

"Thank you." Manningham relaxed a little as he put back the receiver.

Then he observed to Judd. "Anyway . . . we've got a fair amount of time to sort this thing out." And wistfully, his eyes turned to the window.

White clouds—small white clouds—sailed freely across the limitless blue above his cramped world. Summer—the middle of the portines' busy season—Aircraft after aircraft rolled off the Ramp below him. Everything was so busy, it was difficult to think.

He became conscious that Judd was looking at him curiously. More abruptly than he meant to, he said, "All sorts of considerations come into this—This afternoon . . . I'll get hold of Dallas, and see what he says."

He saw the Training Captain after lunch: at last, an office had been given him near the Fleet Superintendent's and he was settling the furniture in it, when Manningham came in. "All right . . . is it?" he said.

Dallas wedged a green filing cabinet into position in a corner and wiped the dust off his hands. "Not too bad."

Manningham said, "There's a bit of trouble with George Gort down the Route."

Dallas looked up quickly. "What's happened now?"

"Nothing's happened," Manningham said stiffly, irritated with Dallas for jumping to conclusions. "Just a check he had from Judd down the Route."

"Judd back already?"

Manningham nodded.

"Didn't waste any time, did he? I suppose he came back and said George was unsatisfactory?"

"You've taken the words right out of his mouth."



Dallas put his hands in his pockets and went over to sit on the desk. He took out his case and lit a cigarette. He smiled.

"This is serious, Hugh."

"I know it's serious. I'm just appreciating Judd's singleness of mind."

"I hope you also appreciate the implications."

Dallas drew in a deep lungful of smoke, and blowing it out, watched its blue progress up to the ceiling.

"Look, Hugh," Manningham said. "We're all in this together . . . but George is on the Phoenix with *your* blessing!"

"They're *all* on the Phoenix with my blessing."

"*You* said George was satisfactory, and now ---"

"Now I still say he's satisfactory . . . till it's proved to me he's not." Dallas threw his cigarette on the floor and stubbed it out with his heel. "Well . . . what does Judd say?"

"Apparently George came in dangerously low at Calcutta."

Dallas said, "How does Judd know it was dangerous? Approaches vary. If he was coming in on the short runway there . . . his approach *should* have been low"

Manningham admitted that. He looked a little more cheerful. "Then there's the question of temperaments . . . Judd and George in the same cockpit together- ---"

Dallas grunted. "Must have been a Teddy Bear's picnic!"

"And then of course, Judd has done no instructing"

"None." Dallas said decisively. "He doesn't know what to look for."

"I hope *you* do," Manningham said, with a wry attempt at humour. "Judd seemed to be quite sure -"

"And I've got to be quite sure it isn't a question of someone's face not fitting! If what Judd says is true . . . obviously we must do something. But I want to see a bit more evidence before I'm persuaded!"

Round noon next day, in the Fleet Superintendent's office, having been informed (tactfully and circumspectly) of Dallas' attitude, Judd sighed, said he had never wanted to bring it up, protested he wouldn't have mentioned it again, if his hand hadn't been forced in this way.

Then he opened his brief-case, and laid on Manningham's desk a little bundle of dry and thorny stalks.

Back in his office, after a lunch he could hardly remember eating, Manningham stood with his hands in his pockets staring out of the window. But he saw nothing of the marshalled aircraft or the passengers or the lorries or the cars. He did not hear the rise and fall of engine notes, the now subdued, now deafening murmurs and crescendos - the continuous throbbing of the blood of his world around him. He was obsessed with the problem of George Gort. And he was getting no nearer a solution.

Moodily, he walked back to his desk, almost as though it might help him, and sat there tapping the top of it absent-mindedly with his pencil.

It was a good desk. Dark blue leather, unpolished elm. He liked it in the same way as he liked the firm feel of his swivel chair, the décor of the office, his name on the door, his special place in the car-park. These were some of the compensations for the feel of an aircraft rising under your hands, the sight of the Northern Lights he had seen so often on the Atlantic run, the dawns and the dusks and the sunsets, for the curiously ever-young companionship on the flight deck, for the sweet satisfaction at the end of a trip of another good job chalked up behind your name.

And why couldn't Gort see it? The time came for everyone. The next generation came pushing up. Sure, there were a few more years of flying left in him. But why not take this golden opportunity when it presented itself?

For most, there was no such compensation. They had to invest their pensions in garages, country pubs or market gardens, unless they could stomach knocking on doors till the Management found a safe minor job for them. Gort was getting it on a plate. And what did he do? He pushed it away.

And so it befell the Fleet Superintendent - his contemporary, his friend - to find some alternative to having him practically frogmarched out of the back entrance. Manningham winced. His anger was the measure of his pity.

With sudden energy, he began attacking the pile of letters in front of him. But he couldn't concentrate on them. He rang for his secretary. Twice, as he dictated, his mind skidded right off, leaving her pencil poised, while he saw himself having yet another talk with Gort on the matter.

The trouble was the man's obstinacy. He never would budge, once he'd made up his mind. By five o'clock that afternoon, Manningham had almost decided to take an aircraft off the line, and get Dallas to give him another Check - a really severe one. That would be the best way of doing it, and something must be done today. He had in fact his hand outstretched to the phone, when his secretary came in and said, "I'm sorry, but Captain Braddock wondered whether you could spare a few moments."

When he nodded, the Australian came in and stood in the doorway, red-faced and frowning.

"It's about my Phoenix training," he said, sitting himself awkwardly in the chair that Manningham waved him to, accepting a cigarette and nodding his thanks.

"How are you getting on with it? All right?"

"I was. No aircraft now. Haven't done any training for weeks. Very irritating . . . I'll forget all I learnt ----" His voice became nasal with a mixture of disappointment and truculence.

"Nothing we can do about it, I'm afraid," Manningham said. "Captain Dallas will have told you . . . he can't even get aircraft for Checks. They're tied up at Atlas with tests of their own." He went on with the usual syrup talk that he could now do almost in his sleep. Pilots often came in to grumble to him. He would listen sympathetically, say a few hopeful words, and then they'd usually go away quite happy. Now he told Braddock that it was disappointing, but there it was. He was getting valuable experience down the Route, and just as soon as a Phoenix was available—

At last, after Manningham had slid his wrist round to look at his watch, the Australian wriggled in his seat as his preliminary to departing. He smiled ruefully, "Looks like another trip as Third Pilot."

"Third Pilot?" Manningham began to smile sympathetically, half getting up himself to help him away. Then he sat back. "Of course," he said. "You've just done one with Captain Gort, haven't you?"

"Gort and Judd." Braddock said with slight emphasis.

"Good trip?"

"Yep. Pretty fair."

Deliberately slowly, Manningham asked. "Didn't you hit the hedge at Calcutta?"

Braddock said nothing.

There was a long silence. Then Manningham leaned slightly across the desk. "What happened exactly?"

He was not sure why he had asked. He expected the Australian to shrug his shoulders and leave it at that. But instead, Braddock looked genuinely uncomfortable and said, "I thought you knew."

"All I know is that Captain Gort hit the hedge, coming in to land."

"Well . . ." The Australian hesitated. "Bit more in it than that."

"What?"

All Braddock did was to clear his throat.

"Where were you," Manningham prodded, "for the landing?"

"Up front. In the navigator's position."

"So you'd get a good view. Well, then?"

Braddock was looking almost purple with embarrassment. It was obvious that the conversation had acquired a flavour of tales-out-of-school.

Manningham said slowly, "The incident has come to my notice. Obviously some action must be taken. As Captain Gort was in command —"

"It wasn't his fault."

"Why not?"

Again the self-disliking shrug. "Judd kept on at him . . . not to use the short runway . . . that was the first thing. Then he kept on telling him how to do the approach. Needling him. Then——"

"Go on."

"Kept telling him he was too *high*. Not just telling him.

Reducing power, and putting down the flaps without being told. Still." Braddock went on with faint cheerfulness, "I will say this for Judd . . . when they found the stuff on the wheel, he did say . . . I'm afraid we hit the hedge. Reckon he knew it was rather more than six of one and half a dozen of the other."

He looked around as though wondering if now he might go. And when Manningham said nothing, as though in apology: "Everything went fine after that." He pushed back the chair, and the rather clumsy movement dragged Manningham's eyes up to him. "We'll see what we can do about your training," he said automatically.

"Thank you," the Australian said, as though now he wished to God he'd never come about it.

When the door had shut behind him, Manningham sat for a long time quite still. He heard various office doors slam, various cars start up and slide out of the park. The administrative side of the airport was closing up for the day. And the problem of Gort was even further away from a solution. In fifteen minutes, Braddock had neatly tipped the kaleidoscope and altered the whole pattern.

One thing was certain: the Check was not for the time being all-important.

It could wait.

Next day, Manningham arrived at his office later than usual. The night had brought him no wise counsel. Instead, a result of turning things over in his mind too late and too long, he seemed to have been dreaming all the time that he was in the middle of a merry-go-round, beside the steam organ that puffs out the music. And there, whirling about him on wooden white horses—rising up, falling, rising up, falling—round and round to the fluty wheeze of a military march, all at a gallop to catch each other up, came George Gort: and after him, Judd: and after him, Braddock: and after him, Pickering: and after him, Dallas: and after him, the President: and after him, George Gort again. And never once getting nearer to each other, and never once—though there he was in the centre, turning

wheels, flicking switches, pulling levers—showing any signs of stopping.

But he would stop it. That very day. Despite the remnants of the dream that seemed to cling to him like the earthy smell of the fog along the Surrey lanes, giving him a vague clogged feeling of defeat before he started.

Then everything conspired to slow him up. Judd wasn't in his office when he phoned. There were half a dozen routine matters that could not be postponed any longer. And then, just as he had sat back for five minutes' quiet thought, the phone rang and it was a summons to the President.

A talk with the President was the last thing he wanted. Nearly as distasteful was the eighteen-mile drive through snarled-up traffic, knowing that the chat would be about Gort and what had been done or rather, not been done about him.

When he was ushered in, the President came out from behind his desk to welcome him, which was not a good sign. And exactly as he had known, it was just this question of Captain Gort and this job.

Manningham grasped the permitted breather of accepting a cigarette, having it lit and bringing over an ashtray. He crossed his legs and furrowed his brow. "Well, as I told you, sir, he turned it down."

"That was over a fortnight ago." The President smiled. He was a slight man, light on his feet, full of points and planes, so that he seemed made up of an arrangement of shaded triangles. "Captain Judd tells me"—he rearranged his cut-glass ink-stand with finicky exactitude—"that there's every likelihood *now* of Captain Gort accepting our . . ."—he paused long enough for the words *extremely generous* to be silently expressed—"offer."

His long pointed chin raised itself, gave a little side-flick of approval. "Good man, Judd." Then he turned encouragingly to Manningham. His eyes narrowed to points, but his thin mouth was still smiling. "Would Manningham, *could* Manningham, the eyes seemed to say, make the grade? Older though he was, slow and faint-hearted, would he scramble up to the favoured heights along with Judd and the Phoenix youngsters, and a few other of the President's bright blue-eyed boys?"

Manningham said shortly, "I don't think he'll alter his mind. He's got the idea that he's not the right man for the job."

"But after——"

"After this Route Check by Captain Judd, he most certainly won't alter it. He'd get the idea"—he watched the President steadily—"that all we wanted to do was to get him off the Phoenix."

Why all this pretence, he thought, this hypocrisy? Why doesn't he come out into the open and say *but that's exactly what we do want?* All this shuffling round the point.

"We don't want to give him that idea. But I can't understand——"

"He's got a great pride in being a pilot."

"I see." The President dipped two thin fingers into his top waistcoat pocket and brought out an odd old-fashioned gold watch. "I see." He adjusted the lapel of his coat. Grey, dark grey. Manningham became absorbed in the texture of it. Grey, with a tiny pattern of black.

Smoothly, conversationally, the President went on, "I think I indicated before that Captain Gort . . . could serve us better elsewhere."

Manningham nodded.

"After the Inquiry," the President touched his forehead lightly, a nervous gesture of fatigue, "I presumed, Manningham, that you'd deal with it there and then. *Yourself*." He pushed back a little from his desk. "I don't like to dictate my staff's methods. I like initiative. We're a smooth machine. Better still, a team. Dovetailing."

Hand in glove, Manningham thought, I know what that means now. You the hand and I the glove to keep it clean. He stirred in his seat. "I felt, sir, that if he passed his Check all right, he should be allowed——"

And as though he hadn't spoken, the President went on, "Knowing, Manningham, what's in my mind"—he smiled primly—"before I know it's there myself."

He sighed. He helped himself to a cigarette, and allowed Manningham to light it. The Fleet Superintendent had the feeling that he was being closely scrutinised all the time the flame

was on his face. But when he looked across at the President, there was only a pleasant smile directed towards him.

"I don't think there's any point in asking him again. And I can't force him——"

The President made a small economical gesture of distaste. "Of course not, Manningham! We wouldn't want Captain Gort to feel that he'd had a poor deal from us." He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "Especially after that good show of his. Furthermore"—the President smiled again—"he knows quite a few people. Lives, I believe, in Mayfair."

Quiggan Square, Manningham thought. It made its impression. It had, after all, its uses.

"It would be unfortunate if ever . . . but there, no matter, I can leave this little business . . . in your"—a pause, pregnant with doubt or was it threat?"—"very capable hands."

He got up. He was shaking Manningham's hand as they walked to the door. "I know very well there are ways round this somewhere. And I know very well, Manningham, that you're going to find them."

He rested his hand on the doorknob. "And if you want any help . . . have a word with Judd. A good man, Judd."

But the President had exaggerated. There were not ways. One way, one way only. A Check. The failing of a Check. Nothing short of that would convince George Gort. Nothing could be more final or, outwardly anyway, more fair.

Back in his office, Manningham made his plans. It was odd, he thought, no matter how hard you tried, in the end you bowed to the inevitable. He pondered the positions on the route of the various aircraft. He rang up Maintenance.

There, he obtained the one reasonably bright spark in a troublesome few days. Dallas could have Victor Lima for training as soon as it came out of the hangar from an 80-hour Inspection. When would that be? A pause. Saturday afternoon, maybe Sunday morning.

Manningham made a note in his diary. It was done.

He was just pondering how best he should tell Gort——



You know, George, it's this matter of your Route Check . . . this landing . . . another Check with Hugh . . . pure formality—when there was a knock on the door.

He called, "Come in." And then there was Judd—smiling, easy, lazily alert.

"Well," he said, putting his hands in his pockets, and walking over to the window and resting one foot on the radiator underneath it. "All fixed?"

Manningham moved his papers on his desk and said casually, "About what? Gort, d'you mean?" Then shrugging his shoulders. "Yes. Another Check."

"When?"

"Saturday. I'm taking an aircraft straight off an 80 hour."

"Should be sooner."

"Can't be sooner." Manningham's mouth tightened. He signed his name at the bottom of a letter without reading it. He put down his pen and swivelled around to face Judd. He hated talking to people behind him. "Just how," he said grimly, "d'you do a Check without an aircraft?"

Judd smiled amiably enough. "All right. I said it *should* be sooner. At least you'll agree there."

"I don't know about that. I'm not so sure it *was* entirely Gort's fault. That landing, I mean."

"No?" Judd's face darkened. He pulled over a chair and straddled it backwards. "Who says so? Gort? Dallas?"

"It's possible that you did it"—Manningham measured his words slowly—"between you."

"Gort was doing the handling."

"You were doing the talking."

Judd flushed. "Sounds like Dallas. Sounds like his guess . . . because I'm not an instructor." He raised his voice higher. "And that Check . . . I don't want it done by Dallas."

Manningham looked up sharply.

Judd said, "You look surprised."

"Of course I'm surprised! Dallas is the only Training Captain at present. He checked Gort before. You didn't object."

Judd narrowed his eyes, glancing out of the window as though

he had just noticed something that interested him far more than this conversation. "I didn't *know* then."

Manningham gave his shoulders an irritated shrug. "Didn't know what?"

• "That he's biased."

"Nonsense! Towards Gort? The reverse, if anything."

He looked at his watch. He was about to say, and now I'm sorry but I'm busy, and add some slight remark about time spent with the President, when Judd said, "Not towards Gort. Towards Gort's daughter."

Manningham began, "Gossip. I don't suppose he *even* knows——"

"Not just gossip. I don't think I ought to tell you . . ."

Nevertheless, he did. In all the detail that Miss Mitchell had told him, with a few small theories of his own added on.

"So you see"—Judd inclined his fair head. "Unfortunate. But there it is. We can't risk him, can we?"

Manningham said nothing. He had no intention of committing himself either way. He had a fleeting picture of Charlotte, a momentary reflection that she did not strike him at all as Dallas' type. But then he had already heard rumours about Dallas. Now his reluctance to check Gort became coloured with the idea that it was because Dallas knew he couldn't fail him. When he couldn't get out of it—he'd made the best of it. He had never known Dallas quite so enthusiastic about a Check. Was it to reassure both Manningham and himself?

He began wondering what he should do now.

Of course he knew. He was well aware of the action he would have to take. But not at the moment. He'd wait till he'd had a good night's sleep. Then he'd take an aircraft off the route. He'd get an independent Check pilot. He'd tell Dallas. He'd tell Gort. He'd arrange it all. He'd see that everything was done for the best. But not tonight.

Tomorrow.

That night was like the one before. Only worse. They were still on their horses, but they were not now going in circles on a merry-go-round. All of them, himself included, were off full gallop after George Gort—but never quite catching him up.

In the morning, it was raining. He snapped at Jean, and she was irritatingly nice about it. He drove to the airport—wet hedges silently dripping, wet roads, wet tyres—everything was hushed and dreary. He opened his mail.

On the other side of the door, he could hear the small movements as his secretary settled herself in to the morning's work. Outside, tyres hissed on the damp tarmac, engine notes came mournfully over the heavy air. Inside his office, there was only the measured click of the electric clock. Manningham reached for the telephone and said, "Now."

At the other end of the line, Maintenance were as usual exasperated. No, he couldn't have an aircraft earlier. Only if tomorrow's service was delayed. A long pause. Very well, if tomorrow's service was delayed, then he could have Victor Delta for three hours this evening.

Then he phoned Captain Bateson. He closed his mind to exactly what he was doing by telling himself that Bateson had already been nominated as Dallas' new assistant, now the Training Section was being expanded. Bateson was experienced and after all, another opinion, an independent opinion (and quietly to himself, an unbiased opinion) would be the answer. He would then have done everything he could possibly do—no matter what happened. He would let Dallas know, straighten it up with him, some other time.

God, he thought, after he'd phoned a surprised Bateson, in this job you begin by distrusting someone, and you end by distrusting everyone.

But he was delaying the worst phone call. He knew that. Deliberately delaying it. He swivelled around from his moody contemplation of the airfield. The rain was clearing a little. The August sun was yellowing the shallow pools along the tarmac. He gave Gort's number and waited. He kept standing. Odd, somehow it gave him more authority. He tried to imagine Gort coming padding through that rather ridiculous lounge. And he kept concentrating on that so that he would be unable to imagine the look on Gort's face.

He had the opening phrases all ready. Hello, George. Hope I didn't get you up. Gort was an early riser. He would protest,

as he always did, that he'd been up since six. And before that wondering expectant pause . . . Gort had very little telephone small talk . . . he'd say, chuckling perhaps . . . look, what's this I hear about you moving half the hedge at Calcutta . . . a chat about it . . . then, fact is Judd wants another check on your landings . . . getting Bateson to do it, Dallas is too busy . . . nothing to it . . . come round for a drink afterwards, eh?

It was still ringing. On and on. With that empty sound as though no one was going to answer it.

Ever.

He put the receiver down. And then thinking George, as he often did on his stand-off, might have come to the airport, he rang Operations. Had they seen anything of Captain Gort today?

Yes, they had.

Good, when?

At seven-thirty

Seven-thirty? Early. Had they any idea where he was now?

He was estimating Rome in three-quarters of an hour.

Rome? But he's not due out till Tuesday!

There was that Special, just to Ranjibad and back. Leyland had gone sick. Creighton was moving into a new house today. So as usual they had asked Captain Gort——

When was he due back?

The day after tomorrow.

As Manningham put down the receiver, his main emotion, far larger than either his surprise or his dismay, was an overwhelming sense of relief.

It was a reprieve.

Nothing now could be done till Saturday.

**I8** One by one, ringed round by hazy haloes, the tin-shaded lamps along the airport road floated past: slowed up: halted in the oblong shadow of the Operations Room. The rear door of the taxi opened. Along from

the boxed-in darkness of the seats at the back, Captain Gort stepped out on to the tarmac.

Mr. Robinson was there to greet him with a smile—partly of welcome, partly of pride and personal satisfaction. “A full load, Captain! Every seat taken!” He paused, waiting expectantly and apparently in vain before suggesting, “Captain Judd will perhaps now be pleased?”

“Perhaps,” said Gort. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. “Hardly breathe, can you?”

With the flat palm of his hand, obsequiously the Manager preselcted the wide-open doorway. “It’s cooler inside, sir.”

It was—a little. In the neon-lighted room under the fans, the First Officer stood with his arms folded beside the table on which the navigator was reading off the graphs in the Phoenix Operations Manual.

Gort nodded at them both. “Evening, Mr. Joynson . . . Mr. Taylor.”

The navigator looked up, and thoughtfully brushed his lips to and fro with his pencil. “We’re going to need quite a bit of the runway, Captain.”

“How much?”

“5300 feet . . . unstick speed 119 knots.”

“Let’s see.” Gort bent down over the table. Again he saw the familiar authoritative sweep of the green straight lines. Unmistakable against their background of squared paper, held in a frame of horizontal and vertical time-bases, neatly numbered, the graphs easily revealed their mathematical truths. Using a ruler for more accurate results, knowledgeably and carefully, Gort extracted the same information from the designs. “That’s right, Mr. Taylor . . . 5300 feet. Still leaves us 800 feet of the runway to play with. Unstick . . . yes, *exactly* 119.”

The Captain tossed the ruler back on the table and straightened up. Addressing the First Officer now, he said, “Mr. Joynson . . . you and I will walk over to Met now.” And before the two of them left the office, over his shoulder to the navigator: “You have the winds, Mr. Taylor? Then start the Flight Plan to Cairo, would you?”

As the two pilots walked side by side to the Meteorological

Office in the main building, Gort said, "As you know, we're very heavy tonight, Mr. Joynson."

"Yes, sir."

"And there's no need to tell you how hot it is."

"Awful, isn't it? So damned sticky, sir. Talk about a Turkish bath——"

"Which means the take-off *must* be done strictly in accordance with the Book."

"Of course, sir."

"When you call the speeds for lifting the nose-wheel off the ground and for the unstick . . . you must be careful that the speeds you give me are the *exact* readings of the air-speed indicator."

"They will be, sir."

"Not that I'm doubting you. It's just a point I want to emphasise, that's all. Understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good!" They had reached a lighted glass door behind which there was a low hum of voices. Pushing it open, and himself leading the way, Gort said, "Now let's see what the weather's going to be like!"

It was going to be fine: fine all that 2300 mile way, hardly a cloud and Cairo would be clear. Gort made a joke which the Indian forecaster didn't understand. He was humming on their way back to Operations, where the Flight Plan was all ready for him to check: Traffic were leading the passengers out to Phoenix Victor Mike, waiting silently on the deserted ramp: Mr. Robinson, anxious for an on-time departure, was urging encouragement to one of his minions in khaki uniform—sweating over the immense complications of the figures and lines on the orange-coloured load-sheet—on tenterhooks, till finally he could call out triumphantly: "All ready, Captain! All ready to sign, sir!"

With his usual rather ponderous preciseness, Gort sat down and ran his pencil over the form, muttering additions and subtractions under his breath, stolidly re-checking everything the Indian had done, while Mr. Robinson moved from one foot to the other, kept on looking at his watch and sighing.

"Weight 77,272 Kilos . . . C. of G. 2 feet aft of the datum." Gort grunted at last. "That's right! Good . . . good!"

Watched by a beaming brown face, instead of a tick as might have been expected, at the bottom, in big rather child-like characters, the pilot wrote *G. Gort*. And then he was immediately escorted by the Station Manager over to Customs and Immigration to sign the ship's papers.

It was not until they were standing together by the aircraft steps under the high brilliance of the arc lights that Mr. Robinson appeared to allow himself to breathe normally and with relaxation. "Nine minutes before you're due off the chocks, Captain! Just nice time!"

"There isn't anything else for me to sign, is there?" Gort asked. "You know how they're always adding to the paper work . . . wouldn't want to miss signing anything."

"Now what have you done?" The Station Manager held up his left hand to count them off on his fingers. "Weather forecast . . . load and trim sheet . . . Flight Plan . . . passenger lists . . . cargo lists . . . customs declarations . . . clearances . . . aircraft serviceability sheet. You've signed everything, Captain! You're all right, sir!"

"Right then," Gort said. "We'd better get moving."

And waving his hand in goodbye, he mounted up into his glittering silver kingdom which—on paper anyway—for the next five hours he owned, plate and rivet, body and soul.

Up in the cockpit, he settled himself comfortably into the left-hand seat, adjusted the rudder pedals for his long legs, took off his jacket and draped it over the back. "Ah, that's better!" he said, rubbing his hands, and then to the steward who had come forward to report passengers strapped in and rear door shut: "Mr. Minty . . . after take-off, a lime juice would slip down very nicely."

"Certainly, Captain."

"What about you, Mr. Joynson? Sound all right to you?"

"Just the job, sir."

"Let's have four lime juices then . . . one for everyone. Oh and Mr. Minty . . . put plenty of ice in them!" And then in a clipped, efficient, down-to-business tone of voice, "Completed the Before Starting Engine Check List, Mr. Joynson?"

"Yes, sir."

**"Then start Number Three!"**

Four minutes later, dead on schedule, her whistling engines puffing out behind her a great grey wake of dust, Phoenix Victor Mike moved between the small blue lamps of the taxi-way, and took up a position facing the wide row of yellow lights that, slightly inclined to each other, led to the darkness of the night ahead.

There, they stopped: there, they completed their checks: there, they were cleared to climb on course, cleared to Cairo at 48,000 feet.

Gort pulled the curtain behind the pilots tight shut. He put the flaps down 20 degrees. He turned down the cockpit lights till only the phosphorescent numbers on the instruments glowed green in their faces. He took out a handkerchief, carefully wiped the sweat off his face and hands, tucked it back in his pocket. For a moment, he sat quite still, staring at the runway lights, one after the other, two long rows of them that stretched—unused—for over a mile ahead of him.

Then he put his right hand on the throttle levers and moved them hard against the stops.

Above the noise of the jets the First Officer called out: "R.P.M. checks at 11,500 on all four, Captain. Fuel flows O.K. Engine pressures and temperatures normal."

"All set, Mr. Joynson?"

"All set, sir!"

Gort released the brakes. Very slowly, rumbling lugubriously on its three wheels, Phoenix Victor Mike began to move, trundled past one light, then another; no urgency, reluctantly even it seemed, no desire to go any faster, to climb up into the night.

And then gradually, the power of the engines began to take effect. Out of the corner of his eye, Gort was conscious of the lights slipping by more quickly.

Shaking up and down on its oleo legs, the Phoenix pounded on and on. Faster and faster the lights came up, glittering and moist in the hot air, to disappear behind them.

"75 knots!"

With infinite care, Gort lifted the nose-wheel off the ground—and waited.



This was the worst time: always the worst time. Now the aircraft seemed to be plunging headlong: the lights flashing by so quickly that there seemed no interruption to them, forming a long illuminated line. And still no sound, no call from the First Officer.

Gort's hands tightened on the control column. How many lights ahead of him now? Six . . . yes, six. No, five. Four now——

He could hear the howling of the jets, was conscious of the shaking and quivering of the fuselage as the main wheels rocketed over the uneven surface of the runway.

"119 knots!"

At last, he thought. He eased back the control column, felt with relief the main wheels unstick.

And then suddenly, the last three runway lights went askew. The right wing had tipped. A juddering shiver came over the aircraft's thin plates as the starboard wheel hit the ground.

Gort tried to ease the nose forward, before pulling up the right wing. But the only result was that the other wheel came back to earth on the port side. Then they were rocking, first forward, then back, further back——

He tried to correct, but though the feel was there from the artificial mechanism, all response appeared to have gone from the controls. Nothing he did seemed to make any difference to the aircraft's attitude. The Phoenix wallowed helplessly, as at full power the jets screamed to get airborne.

Remembering, Gort felt the sweat pour down his forehead, stinging his eyes. There were two lights left. Desperately, he fought this high speed lassitude, this unwillingness of the aircraft to leap up into its element. He had to get the Phoenix off. He knew it was the same terrible spasm that had attacked Victor Fox. And now, in the three seconds given him, grimly he struggled to force Victor Mike into the air.

There was one runway light left.

He saw it come up to him almost in slow motion, his sense of time had so expanded. There it was, just coming up to the tip of the port wing! In a last effort, he hauled back on the control column, urging with all the power of his hands the sluggish Phoenix

to rise. And failing, called out to the other human being who sat beside him, right in the nose of this hurtling machine: "Brace yourself . . . brace yourself, boy!"

The last runway light flashed by. Onwards the Phoenix rocketed, still glued to the ground, till the boundary lights came up to give their red warning and unheeded, died. But nothing—no, not the darkness that swept out of the horizon ahead to overwhelm them—could shake the steadiness from those tremendous hands.

It was warm, too, in London. Nigel Pickering stood staring out of the open window of the house he rented near his work. To the north-east was the soft pale halo of the city in the night sky. Outside, it was windless. Voices and radios floated up through the darkness of the street. And just visible, blacked out in places, here by the inverted V of the church spire, there by the bus station was the bright pattern of the factory airfield.

He was worrying again. Like a pendulum, his mood always swung between elation and depression. He was consumed with a terrible pride in and for this aircraft. But sometimes doubt crept in. He tried to sweep it away. His creation was proved, wasn't it? From a great conglomeration of mathematical formulae, the answer came out miraculously right. Yet doubt returned—an unwanted, meddlesome guest in this strange world of his, where art and mathematics joined together to produce a harmonious blending of adventurous endeavour and dull safety.

With an irritable shrug, he turned away and lighting another cigarette, went back into the lounge.

In the Manningham's house, supper had just been served when the telephone rang. Jean Manningham raised her eyebrows and reached over for the receiver. "Hello," she said. And then making a half-humorous, half-exasperated face. "It's for you, darling. The airport, as usual."

It was Maintenance. Manningham wearily swept a hand over his hair. Yes, they still needed an aircraft. He made a rapid calculation. Gort would be leaving Ranjibad about now. Back

tomorrow. Two day's rest—and then the Check. "Monday," he said. "I want it for Monday."

He went back to the table, frowning. He answered in monosyllables for most of the meal. Another twenty-four hours of his few day's grace had run out. The Gort affair would have to be settled.

Gort. He could see him now. With his passengers and crew. The big square figure radiating an immense and yet humble satisfaction with his lot in life.

He put up his hand and touched his face. His right cheekbone, just under the eye. That's where it always went white when he was strained. It was his danger signal. He had often seen Jean glancing at it.

"Darling." His wife made a little gesture towards him, holding her head on one side, trying to coax him out of it. "What are you thinking about?"

"About George. George Gort."

"Oh." She looked relieved. "He's on service, isn't he? When's he back?"

"Tomorrow." He helped himself to fruit. "I thought we might have them around."

"Of course. Whenever you like. What day?"

"Monday," he said. "I want it to be Monday evening."

"All right." She poured the coffee, and passed him over a cup. "I think I half-promised the Warners. But I can get out of it. Soon as I've had my coffee, I'll give Charlotte a ring."

Charlotte answered the phone nervously. She had heard it ringing as she came up the last few steps. Odd, but it had seemed to fill the flat with a strange quality of menace. It had been as though she had known she would come back from the party to find it shrilling through the empty hall.

She fumbled with her key. She was frightened now that it would stop before she reached it. She had flung down her bag, switched on the lights, stretched out her hand, and then paused.

At last, with an impatient shrug at herself, she had lifted the receiver and said in a small breathless voice: "Mayfair 9812." And then in a sudden rush of warmth, "Oh, hello, Jean. Yes, this is Charlotte. No, I haven't a cold. Didn't it sound like

me?" She laughed. "I'd only this minute got back. A cocktail party. Oh, fun . . . yes. Quite nice. I left before it was finished, though. I'm glad now I did."

She glanced around the hall, and through the open door of the lounge. She wondered why she had been restless all evening. Why she had wanted to hurry home. Why the hot room and the chatter and the people had suddenly filled her with a sense of utter desolation. She was tired, of course. It had been a long day. She put up her hand and smoothed the neat parting of her hair. Aloud she said, "Yes, Monday would suit me fine. And I expect it will be all right for father. I'm sure it will. He'll look forward to it. So shall I."

Half a mile away, glancing at the diamanté watch on her wrist, Joyce Mitchell said, "It's early yet, Clive. Not eleven. Jennifer's on service. Come on in and have a drink."

Judd smiled. This was only the second time he had gone out with this girl in London. But he must say, they got on very well. She was already opening the door to her flat. He could see that the gas fire had been left burning. That there was a vase of flowers on the table. When she switched on the lamp, everything was soft deep pink, discreet and inviting.

"Very home-like," Judd said, appreciatively settling down in the only armchair. "Very comfortable!"

Eighteen miles west, the bright neon lights of Operations shone down on the face of Hugh Dallas. He had spent all day getting completely straight in his new offices. Then unexpectedly, an aircraft had become available from the hangar, and seizing the opportunity, he had managed to get in two hours night-flying training with Braddock. Now he leaned on the counter beside the Australian, and pushed the aircraft log-books over to the Operations Officer.

He was turning away when the teleprinter close by started banging away. He saw the Operations Officer's eyes glance casually across at the writing that was coming up on the paper. "From Ranjibad. Departure signal of Victor Mike, I suppose."

Then the man's eyes suddenly changed. He looked puzzled, then concerned. "X," he said. X was the highest possible priority, never used on a routine signal.

All three of them were now watching the machine, as with utter impersonal coldness, letter by letter it clacked out: *Deeply regret to inform you*——

**I**9 “Sir,” said Sir Arnold Hobbes, slowly walking over to the wide windows of the court-room, and taking hold of a long cord with a wooden acorn on the end of it. “I think we should all be most grateful. You were not, of course, here, Sir, four months ago, when in great physical distress . . . you will recall the hot summer . . . I asked for them.” He twirled the cord. The acorn spun, but Sir Arnold took no notice of it. He stared out through the glass at the cold drizzle sifting down over the autumn gloom outside. Then abruptly he gave the cord a sharp pull: a clattering filled the court as something darkened even further the top of the window. “Blinds! Blinds, Sir! *Sun-blinds!*”

A murmur of subdued amusement round the room registered the great man’s words, at which he turned immediately away from the window and gravely glared.

He thrust the acorn from him, and returned, his head on his breast, to the centre of the Court, below the high wooden dais at which the Commissioner—this time Sir Christopher Larch, Q.C.—sat with his two new assessors. Softly, softly, Sir Arnold said, “Mr. Commissioner . . . this is a sad occasion.”

“It is indeed, Sir Arnold.”

“I am . . . we all must be, I feel sure . . . a mass of conflicting emotions. You will understand, Sir, my feelings, my memories—that within such a short space of time, fate should involve me in two disasters of such . . . similarity.”

“I understand.”

“You will appreciate that my reference to the sun-blinds was intended as an illustration to show what had been done in the meantime . . . what the long sessions that took place here in June actually *achieved*. It is not my position . . . it is not indeed the Court’s position . . . to apportion guilt. In a disaster of this

magnitude, even to allocate blame is an onerous, an unhappy responsibility. Mr. Commissioner"—and Sir Arnold bowed—"the Company I again have the honour to represent has suffered grievously. The name of the aircraft that for years they strove to perfect has been bannered across the papers of the world with the most tragic connotations. You will readily see that these two misfortunes have been a bitter blow to their world-wide sales programme, part of that desperate struggle for world markets, on the success of which not only they, but you and I, Sir, everyone in this Court, everyone in these overcrowded British Isles depend. Though set back, immeasurably impeded, they will not give up. They will renew their efforts. But one thing, for their sake and ours"—Sir Arnold paused—"I *would* say. We are all busy men, and the world will not wait. The last Inquiry dragged on for over two weeks. The similarities between the two accidents are so marked that may I hopefully suggest that this time the proceedings perhaps can be terminated considerably sooner?"

The Commissioner cleared his throat. "I think that may be possible. We already are clear from yesterday's proceedings that the weather conditions do not enter into it, that the crew and the aircraft were properly certificated, that the Phoenix was properly loaded and all the papers were in order. There remains only to be investigated . . . as far as we can see . . . the possibility of mechanical failure on the part of the aircraft, or human failure on the part of the crew."

"That is the way I see it, too. And you will understand that for obvious reasons, I cannot categorically prove . . . as I did last time . . . that there was no mechanical failure on Phoenix Victor Mike?"

"That is appreciated."

"Thank you. And now"—Sir Arnold turned to face the body of the Court—"with your kind permission, I would first wish to call Mr. Robinson, the Station Manager at Ranjibad."

Mr. Robinson, dapper in a new worsted suit, his black hair neatly brushed over his forehead, came forward to take the oath and to sit on the chair by the long table. His large brown eyes regarded the Queen's Counsel solemnly, as Sir Arnold began:

"Now, sir, in your official capacity you have watched many Phoenix take-offs from Ranjibad?"

"I have . . . yes."

"By all the Phoenix pilots?"

"Not *all* of them . . ."

"But a good many of them?"

"Yes."

"And did you, sir, notice any peculiarity of Captain Gort's technique on take-off?"

"He seemed to lift the nose-wheel off sooner than the others . . . and his attitude at the end of the run appeared more tail down."

"Thank you, sir. Now did you watch this particular take-off?"

"Yes."

"You were standing beside Operations, as usual?"

"Yes."

"And it seemed to you that the same nose-high technique was again employed?"

"Yes."

"Did the aircraft appear to leave the ground?"

"It did not seem to. It carried on to the end of the runway, and then——"

"Yes . . . yes. With the nose still high in the air?"

"Yes."

"You could still hear as loud as ever the high whining engine note at take-off power?"

"Oh yes! Just the same as usual."

"Thank you, Mr. Robinson," Sir Arnold gave him a short, smiling nod. "That is all, sir."

When the Station Manager had left, Sir Arnold, taking some papers from the table, studied them for a moment, and then, his brow furrowed, his hand on his chin, addressed the Commissioner, "Sir, I do not know whether at this stage, my learned friend, Mr. Moss, who represents the British Empire Airways, would like to question the fire and rescue services——"

A middle-aged man, rather stout, with a pleasant, fresh complexion stood up from a group at the left-hand side of the courtroom, and said, "Sir, we have nothing but the highest praise for

those services. Two fire tenders were at the scene within twenty-nine seconds of the crash."

The Commissioner leaned forward over his desk. "The aircraft was already on fire by that time?"

"Yes, Sir. Fifteen hundred pounds of foam extinguisher and two thousand gallons of water—the full capacities of both tenders—were emptied on the centre of the conflagration."

"Did the fire die down?"

"Yes, at first. Then, as the firemen were attacking the fuselage, the flames leapt up again."

"So they could do nothing but wait for the City Fire Brigade?"

"That is so. Three fire engines arrived at the same time as eight ambulances from the General Hospital."

"The fire was then extinguished?"

"Yes, Sir, eventually. But"—and he paused, took his eyes away from the dais—"it had been burning by that time fiercely for fifty minutes."

"You are quite satisfied that the fire services did their duty? That everything was done?"

"Everything. With your kind permission the Airline would wish their appreciation of the courage and determination of all the rescue services to go on the record of this Court."

"That shall be done."

"If it had been humanly possible, the Company are convinced that the airport fire services would have managed to save at least some souls from the crashed aircraft." He paused. "My learned friend, Sir Arnold Hobbes, has already expressed his own and Atlas Aviation's heartfelt sympathy with the relatives of those on board, passengers and crew, all of whom lost their lives. That sympathy I myself and the British Empire Airways do most deeply wish to be associated with."

"I and my Assessors also, Mr. Moss. The whole Court, I am sure."

Silence—for the first time that morning there was complete silence. Though nearly a hundred people were in the oak-paneled court-room, there was not even the sound of breathing. No papers rustled. Only the raindrops moved—slantwise, endlessly falling against the window-panes outside.



And then the Commissioner, as though it was his duty—their leader here—to call them all back from the past to the present said quietly, “Sir Arnold . . . please proceed.”

Sir Arnold Hobbes looked up from the notes and papers on the table. “Sir . . . it had been my intention at this stage to call Captain Manningham, the Fleet Superintendent. But unfortunately that is not possible. Captain Manningham is ill. Captain Manningham has suffered a breakdown . . . a complete nervous breakdown, from which we would all wish him, I know, a speedy recovery. I do not deny that I have several questions I would have liked to have put to him in cross-examination”—he shrugged his shoulders, his eyes large with concern and disappointment —“but as it is, I have no option but to call Captain Dallas instead.”

Descending the same stairs, Dallas came down to sit at the witness’s chair by the table. All around the room, separated from him by a polished expanse of light oak floor were little groups of counsel with their advisers behind them. There was half a row of newspaper correspondents, other experts, a few members of the public only.

He folded his arms, nodded at the pilot assessor whom he knew, and waited.

Sir Arnold was conferring with Atlas Aviation representatives, one of whom was the designer, Nigel Pickering. For minutes he went on talking, keeping Dallas isolated, with all eyes upon him, till the Commissioner said, “Sir Arnold . . . the Court is waiting.”

“Sir, I was unaware of the witness.” Sir Arnold advanced to the table, pursed his lips, tapped the surface with a pencil, smiled. And after the pilot had been sworn in, he said: “Captain Dallas and I know each other . . . do we not, Captain?”

“We do . . . yes.”

“Now, Captain——” Sir Arnold put the tips of his fingers on the table and leaned towards the pilot. “You will remember that on the occasion of our last meeting in this very Court-room, you expressed a categorical opinion that the Phoenix was the most technically reliable aircraft you had flown?”

“Yes.”

"Since that short time ago, I may take it that your opinion remains unchanged?"

"Basically . . . yes."

"Thank you, Captain. Now you will agree I am sure that the crash of Victor Mike bears a remarkable resemblance to the crash of Victor Fox?"

"There are certain similarities."

"*Certain* similarities?" Sir Arnold's eyebrows climbed up towards his white hair in surprise. "Both were on the same runway. Both were at full load. Both were on a hot night. Both were piloted by Captain Gort. Surely you mean *remarkable* similarities?"

"I have already said what I mean."

"Yes . . . yes! Of course . . . of course! Certainly the difference that everyone can see . . . and which adds so much to our problems here . . . is that Victor Fox remained for the most part intact and we could therefore prove that there was no mechanical failure. Victor Mike was unfortunately burnt out, and no such proof is possible. But bearing in mind Mr. Robinson's testimony—"

"I would like to point out that aircraft attitude is deceptive on a dark night."

"But you will also recall that the noise of the engines did not change?"

"I doubt if there would be any noise differential in the event of jet failure, anyway."

"Oh . . . oh, I see." Sir Arnold seemed slightly disappointed. "Well . . . of course you're the expert, Captain. We must always remember that! Shall we bear in mind then only those *certain* similarities I mentioned earlier and deduce from them that a similar cause to the two accidents might be assumed as probable?"

"In the case of Victor Mike, I don't see that you can assume anything. We just don't know what happened."

"Yes . . . yes, I do agree with you. But we are here . . . are we not? . . . to try to lead up to the at present unknown cause of the accident along paths where we *do* know what happened. So shall we go back to the beginning, to the point, where after the first accident Captain Manningham asked you to check Captain

Gort out on the Phoenix. I am handicapped a little by not having Captain Manningham available for testimony . . . but that's right, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . that's right."

"Now am I also right in saying that Captain Manningham was involved in a bad accident a number of years ago . . . and after it, he did no more flying as a pilot?"

"Yes."

"Now . . . of course it wasn't anything to do with you officially . . . but privately didn't you think it would have been wiser to have taken Captain Gort off flying also?"

"I don't see why. Most pilots have an incident . . . though not usually so serious . . . in the course of their working lives of thirty years. If they want to go on flying, and are checked out as competent——"

"But Captain Manningham did no more flying."

"Captain Manningham was badly burned."

"I see." Sir Arnold paused. "So when he asked you to check out Captain Gort, it was normal Company practice?"

"Unless a pilot has been specifically taken off that type of aircraft . . . it's usual."

"Only the Board or the Fleet Superintendent can take a pilot off the type?"

"That's right."

"Did Captain Manningham ask your opinion as to whether Captain Gort should be taken off the Phoenix?"

"We had a discussion. It was agreed in the end the fairest way was to give him a Check."

"You're the only Training Captain on the Phoenix?"

"Yes."

"There would be no question of Captain Gort being checked out by anyone else?"

"No."

"It seems a big responsibility . . . but of course your judgment is completely trusted by the Company?"

"I think so. If they didn't trust me, they wouldn't——"

"—ask you to take on such responsibility. No, of course they wouldn't! You're the only pilot doing Checks, and if

Captain Manningham had asked someone else to do the Check, everyone would have thought . . . including yourself . . . that he didn't trust your judgment. But of course nothing like that entered into it at all?"

"No . . . not at all."

"So shall we move on to the Check itself?" Sir Arnold thoughtfully chewed his lower lip. "Do you know something, Captain? It may well be my ignorance on these things . . . but something very *odd* strikes me about that Check."

Dallas said guardedly: "What's that?"

"Captain Gort did far better on that Check than on the Check you gave him at the end of his Phoenix training. Why would that be?"

"He had more experience on the aircraft. And he was on form."

"On *form*? That's new to me, Captain! I didn't know pilot performance varies."

"In the actual flying of the aeroplane, within certain limits . . . yes. That doesn't mean that sometimes he's safe and sometimes he isn't. All it means is that sometimes his co-ordination appears better, so that the actual movements of the controls are smoother. And his brain is working clearer and faster. I imagine the same sort of thing happens in nearly every job."

"But surely, Captain, this variation must make it very difficult for you to assess a pilot's skill?"

Dallas shrugged his shoulders. "Other things enter into it, apart from form. Nervousness, for instance. Most people hate being checked. You learn to make allowances. The point of a Check is to ensure that the pilot is competent on the type and knows his procedures."

"And of course, to ensure that he's safe?"

"That goes without saying."

"But if you don't mind, Captain,"—Sir Arnold gave a slight smile—"for the record . . . I want it said. Would you agree then that the point of a Check is for the expert . . . the *trusted* Company expert . . . to ensure that the pilot is competent on the type, knows his procedures, and is *safe*?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Captain. Well, certainly the Check itself . . .

I have it here"—he lifted a sheet from his notes—"is very thorough. Sixty-five items . . . take off, instrument flying, simulated emergencies and so on . . . have to be commented on. But this pilot had been responsible for a bad crash on take off. Weren't you, Captain, somewhat apprehensive that . . . no matter how good his take-off on this Check . . . sometime in the future he might do the same again?"

"I was quite certain he would not."

"*How* could you be so certain?"

"A pilot involved in an accident through a flying error never makes that same mistake again."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. The impact of it is so considerable on his conscious and sub-conscious. That's what makes me . . . now . . . suspicious of whether after all the findings of the last Inquiry were correct."

"But, Captain, what other findings could there possibly be but pilot error on take-off?"

"I don't know. But I *do* know the take-off is a critical period on a Phoenix. It takes a lot of runway. Then there's a margin of 20 per cent or more between the unstick speed and the stall on a piston-engined aircraft. As far as I know, there's good deal less than that on the Phoenix, some of which may well be absorbed in wind gusts, instrument and weight errors . . . with consequent loss of lift on take-off."

"You mean that there aren't the same safety margins on take-off?"

"No . . . there aren't."

"Have you any idea, Captain, how many safe Phoenix take-offs there have been?"

"I don't know exactly. A great many, I should imagine."

"Over ten thousand! If there was any *real* trouble with the Phoenix take-off, don't you think it would have manifested itself more often?"

"You'd think so, I know. All the same, I've been investigating and it may be significant that . . . in British Empire Airways anyway . . . the only two take-offs at that full weight and that very high temperature in conditions of near zero wind both resulted in crashes."

"But the manufacturers will have done . . . as part of their exhaustive tests . . . many take-off tests at every possible combination of weight and temperature!"

"I don't know. Have they?"

But Sir Arnold did not appear to hear the question. On he went with, "And Captain . . . if, as you say, there is not so much safety margin on the Phoenix, wouldn't it be advisable to have only men at the prime of their piloting life flying the aircraft?"

"Where the prime of a piloting life occurs alters with the individual."

"But Captain Gort was fifty-one!"

"He was young for his age. He was very fit. There was nothing wrong with his reflexes. And there was one occasion when his strength undoubtedly saved——"

Sir Arnold said swiftly, "Captain . . . this Check. Your remarks were very laudatory."

"Captain Gort flew faultlessly. Completely in accordance with the Book."

"You had confidence in his Phoenix flying?"

"I had complete confidence in him."

"And as the Company's trusted expert . . . you gave it as your considered opinion that Captain Gort was quite safe to go back on the Route?"

"Yes."

"That opinion the Company did not of course question?"

"No."

"In the same way as you had complete confidence in Captain Gort, they had complete confidence in you?"

"Yes."

"Thank you . . . thank you, Captain. That is all." Sir Arnold waved his notes, gave Dallas a nod and a friendly smile as he left the witness chair. Then he was isolated, watched by all eyes: thin white-topped, the left elbow crooked at an acute angle, his long fingers playing a delicate, an inaudible tune on his chin. What he was thinking about nobody could tell, but that he was planning something to say was obvious, for the tip of a pointed tongue came out of his mouth industriously to moisten those long pale lips.

"With your kind permission," he said at last, turning to the Commissioner, "I wish to call Captain Judd."

Down those same six stairs came Judd. He walked over to the vacant chair—upright, dignified, solemn-faced. He made a slight little bow to the Commissioner—no other witness had done that—carefully lifted the creases of his trousers an inch or two, and after taking the oath settled himself down and looked at the solicitor expectantly.

"Now, Captain . . . I won't keep you long. Captain Dallas has already given us the benefit of his expert opinions. But to hark back if I may to the question of whether Captain Gort as a pilot was safe to go back on the Route. Did Captain Manningham ask your opinion before getting Captain Dallas . . . the Training Captain, the only Training Captain . . . to Check him?"

"No, but——"

"I believe that you didn't altogether agree that he should?"

"I did think . . . just a private opinion . . . that perhaps he was——"

"A little too old? Anno Domini, Captain?" A wistful smile full of acceptance for the inevitability of Time crept over Sir Arnold's face. "Something we can do nothing about. Now the Phoenix is a wonderful machine, is it not?"

"A beautiful aircraft . . . yes."

"And it has a magnificent serviceability record?"

"Magnificent."

"You have never had any trouble with the Phoenix on take-off?"

"Never."

"Apart from these two occasions, have you heard of anybody who has?"

"No."

"But you would agree, I think, that a wonderful new aircraft needs picked 'new' pilots, if you see what I mean. Being so modern itself, the Phoenix needs a bit more handling than its grandfather, the piston-engined aircraft?"

"Yes . . . I'd agree to that."

"So perhaps you were surprised when a . . . mature man like Captain Gort came back to the Line after his crash in May?"

"I must admit I didn't expect him to return."

"But you could do nothing. It wasn't your pigeon, was it?"

"No."

"However, shortly after he came back you instituted a system of Route Checking for the pilots. And I believe on your first Route Check, you checked Captain Gort?"

"Yes."

"And you found him, I expect, as Captain Dallas had done, perfectly satisfactory, perfectly safe to fly the Phoenix?"

Judd hesitated; bent his fair head; put his hand up to his mouth.  
"Well——" 6

"Yes, Captain?"

"It's very much a matter of opinion."

"I realise that. We all realise that. But since you did not write a report . . . I must ask if anything happened to confirm your belief that picked men . . . *only* picked 'new' men should fly the Phoenix?"

"Captain Gort came in a bit low at Calcutta."

"A bit low? Does that mean *dangerously* low?"

"I think . . . I think his wheels must have just brushed the top of the hedge, for there were some pieces——"

"Yes . . . yes! I see. We all see. Captain Gort hit the hedge coming in to land at Calcutta."

An immediate stir, a rustling and a talking went through the whole Court. Sir Arnold, still in the centre of the stage, stood quite still, his head bowed—waiting, it seemed, patiently for the excitement to die away. And then, lifting up his head, he said, "Now when you returned . . . I take it that you asked the Company to give Captain Gort *another* Official Training Check?"

"Yes . . . I did."

"And they agreed?"

"Yes."

"How did it come about, then, that he wasn't checked before going back on the Route?"

"No aircraft were immediately available. One was eventually obtained."

"But before then, Captain Gort had been asked to go out much



earlier than his position on the roster, and he slipped out, apparently unnoticed?"

"It was unexpected, certainly."

"And this Check that was all arranged . . . the Check of *paramount* importance. The Company was naturally going to get a first-class man, a man whom they could trust completely to do the Check?"

"Yes."

"In fact they were going to get their most experienced Phoenix instruction pilot, their Training expert to do it?"

Judd took his eyes away from Sir Arnold's. He stirred in his seat. "Well——"

"That's Captain Dallas I'm referring to, of course. Naturally Captain Dallas was to do the Check?"

Judd said nothing.

"Captain . . . I must ask you please to answer my questions. Now Captain Dallas, the trusted Company expert, their *only* Phoenix Training expert, was going to be asked to do this most important Check, of course?"

Again Judd kept silent, till Sir Arnold began impatiently, "Captain . . . I do not want to request Mr. Commissioner——"

Then the pilot opened his mouth and spoke. "Not Captain Dallas. Captain Bateson."

There was no stir this time. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. The hush in the Court Room now matched the continuous soft inevitability of the drizzling rain outside.

"Captain Judd . . . thank you." Slower than ever, the words came drawling out: "I . . . am . . . obliged."

• She was there. Just as he had known she would be. Sitting at the same table in the cafeteria. Hands folded on her lap, head down, staring at the full untouched cup in front of her. She must have heard his footsteps as he crossed the linoleumed floor. But she did not look up.

Dallas stood for a moment, his hand on the chair opposite to her. Then he pulled it out, making a great scraping noise that seemed to echo through the empty place. When he sat down,

she glanced across at him, twitched her mouth into a small mechanical smile and said, "Well?"

"I'll just go and get myself a cup," he said quickly, uncertain now how to start with her. "I wasn't sure if it was you. I thought I'd——"

"All right. You get a cup. I'd been hoping to see you."

When he came back, he fumbled with the sandwiches and cakes and tea—he wanted none of them—so that he spilled some of the liquid in the saucer. He was acting like she should have been, he thought wryly, glancing across at her, surprising a sudden look, almost of sympathy.

She gave him a few seconds to settle himself down. He would almost see her timing him. Then she said in a flat impersonal voice, "How is it going?"

He played for time. "You're not going? Not at all?"  
"No."

"It's difficult to explain." He sipped his tea, reached for a sandwich, unwrapped it, trying to order his mind so that it might escape giving the inevitable answer to the inevitable question.

"I don't want it explaining. I just want to know who . . ."

With her pointed nail, she chased a grain of sugar around the table-top. The skin of her face seemed to have gone slack and grey and old, but her bright red mouth shaped the words clearly enough, ". . . they will blame. *This time.*"

"I don't know. The findings won't be out for weeks."

"You *do* know. You can tell."

"Not for certain. You never know really with these things . . ."

"You knew before. Remember? Here. This very table." She looked at him with a defiant triumphant cruelty. The greenish eyes held a curious mixture of pain and anger. As, though under the goad of intense agony, they intended to exact the maximum penalty from him. "You were right then. You'd probably be right now. Anyway"—her voice became shriller, more imperious—"tell me what you *think.*"

"Charlotte." He rested his head on his hands. "I can't think straight yet. I just don't know."

And when he looked up, she had changed again. Her face

was composed and gentle. She seemed to have retreated from him on to some cold pinnacle of dignity and pain.

"I'm sorry." She began to drink her tea. "It's been pretty awful for you, too." She looked at her watch. "I'm sorry I asked. But I couldn't go to it myself. You understand. And I——"

"Charlotte, of course I understand." He put out his hand and tried to touch hers, but she had begun to look for her bag on the floor beside her. "Charlotte, my dear——"

She glanced up at him, as though startled by his tone. The cold last light from the window fell full on her face. He was shocked at the deep hollows under her eyes, the lack of life and color in her skin.

"Look." He stood up suddenly. "I'm going to take you home. I want to talk to you. And I can't do it here."

She looked around, pointing at his untouched food as though that and that alone was of importance. "Come along," he said.

And obediently, she got up and followed him.

Outside, the rush hour had started. The pavement was full of hurrying dark figures. Buses lumbered and hissed past slowly in the thickening traffic. Lights spilled blotchily on the wet road. The air seemed full of cold and damp, and the insistent lonely sound of aimless hurrying.

"Let's walk," she said suddenly. "Would you mind if we walked?" Her voice was high. And then almost pleadingly, "Just for a little while."

He looked down at her. The wind was flapping her yellow scarf against her cheeks. She was huddled inside her coat. All the same, he could see that she was shivering. "I don't want to get a taxi home. Not from here." Just for a moment she put her arm inside his, almost without thinking. "Silly of me."

At the other side of the road, as though now she had become aware of it, she dropped her arm. They turned down Northumberland Avenue. It was quieter. For a few minutes, they walked along in silence. He took the fough direction of Mayfair, and she kept in step with him turning when he did, crossing the road beside him.

At last, without glancing sideways, she said, "Now tell me. Tell me what happened. Exactly. I'm all right now." She

gave a small nervous toss of her head. Apart from that, staring at her carefully, Dallas saw the same quiet composure on her face, just as usual.

His mind began to form the routine phrases. *Well, of course, what's going to happen is anybody's guess.* No. She'd say *and what's your guess?*

Perhaps so far, *I wouldn't like to say . . . this time, they can't prove there was no mechanical failure.*

Oh, God, what did he say?

He licked his dry lips. He thought he had the right sentences. Silently, he said them to himself: *at this stage, Charlotte, it's quite impossible to tell. Too technical to explain to you, but the fact is, I'm hoping this time—*

And afterwards, in a week or so, when she was feeling less grief-stricken, someone she knew in the Company—Manningham, if he was better—would tell her. She'd be able to take it then.

Their rhythmic footsteps chimed the seconds. They moved down Piccadilly. She seemed unaware of the silence between them. She did not prompt him. She did not help him. They were passing by Green Park. And then it came to him quite suddenly. He didn't attempt to analyse why. But whatever Charlotte had to be told would come from him, and whatever she faced must be *with* him.

He touched her arm, and taking hold of it pulled her down beside him on to one of the seats. The metal was wet. The green arm-rests dripped on to the sodden ground.

He covered her hand with his. "I think they'll blame him again," he said. And the words seemed to go on echoing in the dark air around them.

He tried to make them less stark, less awful. "Things . . . well, things went rather unexpectedly." Remembering Judd's cross-examination by Sir Arnold Hobbes, his mind was filled again with dull anger. "They're trying to prove that the Company itself was uncertain whether he was . . . safe to go back on the Phoenix Route."

She still said nothing. He began to wonder whether, after all, he had spoken aloud. And then she got up. She pretended to be absorbed in fastening the top button of her coat.

"Thank you," she said. With an odd bright smile, she looked at her watch. "I must be going now."

"Charlotte." He stood up, and tried to put his arm around her. She moved away, walking back towards the road.

"I wonder if there's a cab . . . can you see one?" She stood on tiptoe. The high brittle voice was back again. On either side of them, the stream of people flowed homewards. "There's one! No, it isn't. Rush hour . . . oh dear! Awful, isn't it?"

"Charlotte . . . look! Let me try to explain. *Please.*" And taking her arm tightly, "I'm coming home with you."

"No, you're not. I don't want you to explain." Her voice was low and breathless, back to normal again. In quite a matter-of-a-fact tone, she went on, "I'd like you to go now. I don't think I want to see you again."

"I'm not leaving you by yourself."

"I'm not going to be by myself. Jean Manningham's coming. We're driving down to her house."

She suddenly saw a taxi and waved frantically. "Oh, good!" She seemed relieved out of all proportion that it had come. "Goodbye, now." She tried to give him her hand. "It was nice of you . . . really, I do see that, only——"

"I'll phone you."

"Quiggan Square. No, 2, Quiggan Square", she said to the driver, in something of the same imperious way as her father. And then, not looking back at Dallas: "It's off Cavanagh Crescent. I'll show you where to turn."

The door slammed. The taxi moved away.

20 As the Phoenix came closer to the coastline, the sandy desert round Ranjibad glittered up into his eyes. Down there, it would be cooler now—despite the sunshine, despite the cloudless sky. The hot drizzle had moved south. For the province of Sind, the monsoon was over.

Dallas gently eased the nose down further. Through the

windscreen in front of him, he could just see the city: a huddle of yellow houses and tall towers. And beyond it to the east, the great grey cross made by the two intersecting runways of the airport.

His face to the other three men in the cockpit remained the same efficient mask. His eyes stared ahead—looking out for other aircraft, studying the best way to descend. But behind this glazing that his job demanded was the same ache that had been there since the second Phoenix crash. His mouth was tighter: not quite so full, not quite so confident, the flesh round his lips compressed, holding back perhaps the unspoken emotion that he felt behind them. There was inside him still a dull hopelessness that weighed him down, making even the automatic movements of his hands and feet on the controls seem tiring and tiresome to him. His grief was crystallised into a hard numbness, as though his mind was overwhelmed by the crying out of the mourning of so many people, the dry sadness he had seen in Charlotte Gort's eyes repeated in so many homes all over England.

That he might have been in part responsible remained a gnawing reproach to him: and in his distress interminably he had examined his reasons for allowing Gort to go back on the Route. The shock of discovering at the Inquiry the Company's apparent distrust of him as the Training Captain had begun now to make him have doubts of his own judgment. Afterwards, he had gone for Judd bitterly: Judd who sat now, with Manningham gone, where he had always wanted to sit, in the Fleet Superintendent's chair. *Why wasn't he told that Bateson was going to do the second Check on Gort?* Blandly, the beady eyes regarded him. Blandly, he was informed that there wasn't time before the accident—and afterwards, the best thing to do was to hush it up. How could they have known that Sir Arnold Hobbes would use it as such damning proof of the Company's own unsureness that Gort was safe to go back on the Route after the first accident? And then Judd's final remark: "I did my best," implying not only his impeccable behaviour under oath at the Inquiry, but his many efforts beforehand. *I-told-you-so* was never actually uttered, but it rang round the room like the tolling of a bell for the dead.

"Do you want the Field Approach Check, sir?"

"The Field Approach Check?" He turned his head to look at the First Officer beside him. "Might as well . . . yes."

Lower now, he circled the airfield. It was the same sort of glorious sweep there had always been on a Phoenix. Just as expertly as ever before, he performed his checks, kept the Phoenix steady and level as he glided down to the runway, touched down just as smoothly. But there was not the triumph taxi-ing up to the Ramp that there had been.

There were only a few people in the public enclosure. The ground crew were there, certainly; but they did not come running. The bowser lumbered towards them when the jets were stopped. The passengers disembarked. Mr. Robinson stood in the shade of the Operations Room, waiting for him.

"Good trip, Captain?" The same sing-song voice, polite as ever.

"Not bad," Dallas said. "Delayed at London. Waiting for the aircraft to come off a 40-hour Check. This shortage of aircraft——"

There was a silence. It was as though the Station Manager, an ally in this endeavour, had no more encouragement to offer; he had already done all he could with his models, his window displays, his salesmanship. For a moment, the ghosts of Victor Fox and Victor Mike seemed joylessly to flash between them - to disappear again immediately into nothing, for that was the past, and this was the present, and there was the future to think of. Together, they walked into Operations where Dallas was greeted by Creighton, and the serviceability of the aircraft was inquired after.

Behind Creighton's body, bending over the Flight Plan, was Braddock. Dallas nodded, and received a wry grin back. He said, "So this is how they're keeping you employed, eh?"

"Yep. Still bashing round the Route as third pilot."

"Well, it's better than doing nothing."

"I *am* doing nothing."

"Surely you're doing some flying?"

Braddock shook his head. "Just sit and watch . . . that's all."

Dallas searched his mind for some hope to offer. "We should get an aircraft to finish your training——"

"When?"

"Oh . . . some day."

"*Some* day!" Dallas smiled as the Australian looked up at the roof. Then he went out with Mr. Robinson to sign his incoming papers.

His crew disappeared in the crew car to the Imperial Hotel, but Dallas stayed behind. He watched Creighton take off. And then, going into the Manager's office, where Mr. Robinson was now working on receipts and future bookings, he said, "D'you mind if I go over there . . . to have a look?"

Mr. Robinson's sad brown eyes regarded him with complete understanding. "Of course not, Captain. I'll just get permission from Control . . . then I'll take you in my car."

No, there was no aircraft expected. Certainly they could go. Side by side in a small Austin, the pilot and the Station Manager crawled round the perimeter track.

Dallas said, "I'm not entirely satisfied, you know"

"Satisfied, Captain?"

"About the accident, I mean. Somehow . . . I don't altogether believe it was Captain Gort's fault."

Politely, unhappily, incredulously: "No?"

"No."

The tyres made that curious squealing noise against the tarmac. The conversation in the car flagged. Dallas was conscious, in all that bright sunshine, of the black face and the sequinned numbers of the Manager's watch, strung on its silver strap around his hairless wrist. Around them moved a landscape of sand, red ground, rock and dry grass. Beyond, to the north was the slow up-and-down line of the Baluchistan hills.

The car slowed and stopped. Just ahead of them, the thin hot tributary of the taxi-track flowed into the river of the main runway.

Mr. Robinson made a business of reaching for the handbrake. "Here we are, Captain."

Dallas got out. Followed by the Station Manager, he walked slowly into the middle of the runway, and stood there, staring



down that great grey emptiness that stretched, flat and straight, for over a mile in front of him. As always on a runway, he had a sense of having no right to be there: as though this was the property of the machines that came tearing down it, to lift themselves up just before where he was now standing, and launch themselves into their own element. Its size and width dwarfed him, its barrenness depressed him even further. He lowered his eyes, and saw the innumerable marks of tyres: two thick skid marks where some unknown pilot, worried by the close approach of the boundary, had jammed on his brakes and bequeathed to the tarmac these parallel lines of smudged rubber. Then he turned, unwilling to see it, knowing it was there behind him, the solitary wide tyre-track that led off the runway into a mixture of gravel and sand.

He walked over to where the boundary light, its thick red glass unlit and lifeless, was sunk flush with the ground in its concrete socket. Mr. Robinson joined him. He pointed unnecessarily. "You can see the marks quite clearly, Captain."

"And the other marks? The tracks of the first accident?"

Mr. Robinson shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, they've gone, Captain. They were never so clear. The rain——"

"Were they like these?"

"Very similar. Not so deep, perhaps. That time, of course, the aircraft stopped more quickly."

Dallas had started to move over into the no-man's-land beyond, but Mr. Robinson stayed where he was. Though there was pain on his face, mostly it was tiredness, a hopelessness that beset him, the Oriental fatalism and lethargy again attacking him, now that the Western side of his blood, this press-on spirit which had promised so much, had ended here in this. He said, "It is the price——" And then he stopped, because he thought "of progress" was the wrong thing to say at present, and anyway, Dallas was too far away to hear him.

The pilot was walking beside the rut made by Gort's starboard wheel. He kept his eyes down. A hard crust had formed on either side of this brown gutter. Stamped in it, he could see the familiar diamond-shape tread of the Phoenix tyre, which abruptly disappeared three or four yards beyond the runway

where Gort had apparently tried to stop. For the next eighteen yards, the ruts became very deep, as at a high-speed skid, the tyres dug deeper down. Then there was a huge gap in the hedge leading on to a narrow country road; and on the other side, a kind of sandy heath, covered with sparse thorny bushes, marram grass and scrub.

Where Dallas stopped now, the ground was black. There was desolation all around him. To the right was the rough stone outhouse which Gort's starboard wing had hit. It had crumbled, was half-shattered—though the tin roof was still on it, at a crazy askew angle, a corner pointing upwards. Nearby, were houses and mud huts, and those were untouched, but at his feet Dallas could see small bits of metal, tiny pieces that glinted in the sun, some grimy nuts and bolts—fragments that had been left from the clearing away, waiting for burial in the soft sandy soil till the monsoon came next year. Dallas kicked the toe of his shoe into the indistinguishable greyness from which they came, while fifty yards away Mr. Robinson, still on the runway, stood watching him.

Dallas did not know what he expected to find here. It had all been made quite plain at the Inquiry: where the brakes had gone on: how the aircraft had overshot the road: where the right wing had severed after collision with the outhouse. Yes, it was exactly as they had said. For a moment, he wondered who they were, these men who had been here before him, and what they were like: in his mind he could see them pointing, measuring with long tapes exact distances, photographing, gathering up carefully what pieces they felt might be important in their researches.

He still stood there, looking around him. Bending down, he picked up a piece, turned it round in his hand: just a jagged fragment of metal skin, which glinted in the sun as he moved it. He let it drop through his fingers, heard the soft *plop* it made on the ground. The numbness of his spirit seemed now to have invaded his conscious mind, so that wherever he looked there was only a meaningless desolation of dust and burned earth.

There was nothing here, nothing except the pathetic evidence stamped on the ground of a man striving to get airborne and failing, and then striving to stop before it was too late. And

failing again. Whatever outlying causes and circumstances there might be beyond the black and white clarity of the Inquiry, there was no evidence of them here.

He straightened. Without looking back, he started moving away from it now, his footsteps muffled on the sand, loud on the road, getting closer to the still figure waiting for him, the unhappy fawn face beneath the topi all the time getting clearer.

The sound of his steps again went softer. He was back on the over-run of the runway, walking through the gap made by the aircraft, when for some reason he turned his eyes to the left and saw it growing there: grey green, thorny, with tiny leaves as sharp as spines—the cluster of vegetation that formed the sparse hedge.

He walked over towards it. He took a shoot of it in his fingers, careful to avoid the pricks; and then, recognising it for sure, he pulled some out, bent it to and fro several times to break the surprisingly sappy stalk. Taking it in his hands, quickly he walked over to the Station Manager, and in a voice of subdued excitement said, "Look at this!"

Mr. Robinson looked. "That, Captain?"

"Yes. What is it . . . d'you know?"

Mr. Robinson knew. He knew it well, scholar that he was, but he was not interested. "It's a type of euphorbia, Captain."

"Common in India?"

"Round here . . . it is not uncommon."

"It would grow in . . . say Calcutta, then?" Dallas persisted.

"Calcutta? Oh no, Captain . . . I shouldn't think so. Calcutta is green. A lot of rainfall." His face showed surprise at such questions. "This type only grows in hot dry climates. Like a cactus." And then, as Dallas took out a handkerchief and started wrapping up his piece of vegetation, "Why, what's the matter, Captain?"

"Nothing. I just want it . . . that's all."

Dallas said no more. The two of them got back into the car. Behind the driving wheel again, Mr. Robinson accelerated away from the greyness behind them. "Did you find what you were looking for, Captain?"

"I don't know what I was looking for."

"Oh." The Manager did not mention the only thing Dallas had seen fit to bring back from the scene of the accident, now stuffed away out of sight in his pocket. But as they curved round the perimeter towards Operations, he did express in what he thought was a tight-lipped Western way the thin top layer of the feelings of his heart, to which Dallas responded in monosyllables.

The pilot took a taxi to the hotel. He slept there, not seeing his crew, for the ten hours that remained before his pick-up to take the Service on.

It was a quiet trip. Operationally, perfectly satisfactory, though the loads had dropped. The crew said very little. They had their jobs to do, and they did them, but the tragedy was still too close for the effects to have worn off. There was a subdued atmosphere. The usual Phoenix Fleet keenness had inevitably been dulled. Though they still believed in the aircraft, they were not now riding on the crest of the wave. They had, as all of them knew, to fight back again to the top, after this fearful setback. The accident was not mentioned, but it hung over their spirits all the time.

The only thing that was at all unusual in the remaining four days of their Service was that Dallas, during the hectically busy refuelling half-hour at Calcutta, and in the teeth of the usual shortage of transport, had insisted on being driven to the end of the short runway.

There, while an astonished Indian driver waited and wondered, he had disappeared for ten minutes into the darkness of the middle of the night.

**21** The board was new. It was divided into sections headed *Captain, Aircraft, Sector, Time Airborne, Time Landed*. A red light glowed beside the letters of each Phoenix all the time it was flying. The whole concept was similar to its bigger brothers in the Operations Room. It was the first innovation that had been introduced into the office and

it occupied the middle of the wall opposite the Fleet Superintendent's desk. The second innovation had been a dictaphone. Gone were the cut-glass vases and the flowers: but behind the big elm desk was Captain Judd.

He was staring at the board now: and even as he watched, a red light blinked and went out.

The Singapore Service had arrived in London. On schedule again, he noticed, and he smiled with satisfaction as he got up and walked to the window. Despite acute aircraft shortage and many other difficulties, the same five Super-Express Services a week went on undaunted. Despite the second crash, the Phoenix remained part of the prestige of the British Nation. And that prestige had to be maintained.

Leaning his elbows on the sill, he followed the aircraft with his eyes as it weaved its way along the taxi-track to the Arrivals Ramp. There—conspicuous and huge among all the other aircraft—he saw the jets stop, the steps pushed against the fuselage, the main door open. He counted the passengers—not a bad load, considering—and then, a few minutes later, he recognised the crew as they disembarked: the Radio Officer first, then the Navigator, followed by the First Officer. Lastly, Dallas.

He had known perfectly well that it was Dallas bringing Victor Delta in, but all the same when he saw him, a frown came over his forehead. Dallas was somehow a reminder: a relic left over from a different regime. A good Training Captain, certainly: but in Judd's opinion, very lucky still to *be* a Training Captain. The published report, though it had emphasised the Company's own unsureness of Gort as a Phoenix pilot, had not criticised Dallas' passing out of him. The ruling had been that he had done his job according to his lights, and if the Company had no confidence in those lights, then it was their responsibility for employing him in such an all-important position.

Judd walked back to his desk, thinking of the expansion of the Training Section that was already taking place. That in itself was an excellent thing. A one-man-band was undesirable. He was sitting at his desk, tapping his pursed lips with a pencil, making his plans, when there was a knock on his door, and

Dallas came in. "Well, well," he said. "The very man himself!"

Dallas took off his uniform cap. "Expecting me . . . were you?"

"Not exactly *expecting*, Hugh. You were just in my thoughts . . . that's all."

"Kindlily, I hope?"

"Oh yes. Very."

Dallas sat down in the chair near the desk. Instead of putting his brief-case on the floor, he balanced it on his lap. "Odd coincidence! You've been in my thoughts too."

Judd smiled companionably. "I happened to be thinking about the expansion——"

"And I was thinking about that Route Checking trip of yours." Dallas had clicked open the brass catch of his brief-case. "You did the take-off ex-Ranjibad to Calcutta, didn't you?"

Judd's face gave a slight wince. His whole body stiffened into an attitude of *why-bring-that-sort-of-thing-up-now*. In a reproving voice, he said, "Look, Hugh . . . all that's over and done with."

"Is it? I'm not so sure." Dallas paused, waiting. "Well? Did you?"

Judd took the pencil off his lips, and threw it noisily on to the top of the desk. He laced his fingers behind the back of his fair head. "Yes . . . I believe I did."

"It was a hot night, wasn't it? Hot and dark?"

"I expect it was." Judd shrugged his shoulders. "Usually is in August, isn't it? I can't really remember."

"And you were pretty heavy, weren't you?"

"Now that you come to mention it . . . I think we were." He got out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. "But what's all this——"

"Did you notice anything particular about that take-off?" •

"No." Judd drew in a deep lungful of smoke. "Why?"

"You used a lot of runway?"

"Heavy. Hot." Judd stretched. "Of course we did!"

"You haven't by any chance got that bit of hedge you brought back from Calcutta, have you?"

"The hedge Gort hit? Good God, no!" Judd laughed.

"What the hell d'you think we are? The Botanical Museum?"

"Pity!" Dallas opened up the leather flap of his brief-case. "Anyway, I've brought you some more of it." He laid the thin grey green stalk on the desk. "It's a type of euphorbia."

Judd put out his hand and lifted it up to look at it. "Interesting."

"Recognise it?"

There was a pause. Judd shifted his eyes on to Dallas' face and studied it intently. "I can't say I do . . . no."

"It's the same sort of stuff, isn't it?"

Perhaps it was Dallas' obvious insistence on getting yes for an answer. Perhaps it was instinct. But Judd's face suddenly went wary. His eyes narrowed a little. "I wouldn't like to say." And then he laughed again: that same laugh of his—too long, with the echo at the end of it. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not a——"

"I think it is! I know it is!"

"Why ask me then?"

Dallas leaned forward. "Because it's not from Calcutta. It's from the hedge at Ranjibad."

"Well?"

"The hedge at Calcutta is a kind of privet. Very green. This stuff"—he indicated it—"only grows in sandy soils."

Very carefully, Judd put his cigarette down on the tin ashtray. "I may be wrong," he said. "But I'm beginning to catch the drift of the conversation."

"Good."

"You're saying I hit the hedge on take-off."

"That's what I reckon."

"You're wrong!"

"I don't think so."

"This stuff!" Judd held it up scornfully. "It isn't the same at all!"

"You weren't quite so definite a couple of minutes ago."

Judd's face had gone slightly pinker. "God, man . . . I should know! I brought——"

"I know you did. From Ranjibad to Calcutta, too. Tucked up in your wheel well."

"I'm beginning to think," Judd said slowly, "that I don't like your attitude."

They both stared at each other across the desk, Judd twisting the stalk round and round in his fingers. From outside came the sounds of engines starting, the incessant calling of the Tannoy. Then the new Superintendent tossed the shoot back to Dallas. "Rubbish!" he said. "You better have your rubbish back." He picked up his cigarette, and puffed away at it, staring hard at the ceiling. "And since you're harping on the hedge business . . . you'll remember nothing was done about it. Gort wasn't blained."

"Convinced Manningham of the need for another Check."

"Then it's a pity it didn't happen earlier. Might have——" He stopped. He rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Oh hell, Hugh . . . let's forget it! Nothing we can do now! All over and done with."

Dallas said, "I'm not trying to make an issue of this. Don't think I'm trying to shift the blame on to you."

In a tone of injured innocence: "You sound as though you are."

"Well, I'm not," Dallas said shortly. "I'm worried. I'm worried because the thing that damned Gort most was that nobody else had trouble taking off——"

"Because it was his fault, that's why!"

"And now . . . *this*." Dallas pointed to the coil of vegetation that reposed on the top of the brief-case in his lap. "I'm sure . . . whatever you may say . . . that you very nearly didn't get airborne."

"Hugh——" Judd leaned over the desk and stubbed out his cigarette. He had relaxed now. Seeing that no specific attack was going to be made in his direction or on his position, he resumed once more his former geniality. He took on the rôle of kidding Dallas out of it. "You're barking up the completely wrong tree!"

But Dallas took no notice of him. "You had a near-miss . . . I'm certain. And it was only a fluke I found out about it. What I'd like to know is"—he studied Judd's face intently—"how many more have there been?"



"The pilots——"

"Never report near misses . . . you know that. Sometimes, they don't even know they've had 'em. I'm worried . . . I tell you. I'm afraid it's going to happen again!"

"For God's sake——" Judd looked sharply at the open window, as though he was apprehensive that Dallas' words would float down to the busy *mêlée* of men and machines on the tarmac below. "Snap out of it! You can't think straight . . . you're so steamed up! It's in black and white now . . . pilot error. *Everybody* knows it was Gort's fault."

"Not me."

"Well . . . what happened then?"

Dallas hesitated. Then he said: "I don't know."

"There you are, you see!" Judd said triumphantly. "Oh, I know how much you want to clear Gort's name——" He gave Dallas a curious sly sideways look, full of knowledgeable understanding. "But there's no getting away from it . . . everything's been tested and tested again. Atlas has got everything weighed up."

"Have they?"

"Of course they have! They've *got* to have!" And then, in a mild, conciliatory tone of voice. "But if you're worried . . . why don't you go along to Atlas? Have a chat with Pickering?"

Dallas stood up. "I think I might."

"Do." Judd picked up his pencil, and again started to tap his lips. He smiled. "All the same, Hugh . . . take a tip from me. The best thing to do with the past is . . . *forget it.*"

"Or learn from it," Dallas said.

**22** He didn't phone first. He knew that Charlotte would say *don't come*. And he was coming. He parked his car not quite in front of the door of No. 2. He had the feeling that she might be watching from the window, as she had been before. Quiggan Square was deserted. It was almost dusk. Lights were springing on—odd

beacons of pink and white and gold suspended at all levels in the tall houses and flats.

He climbed the stairs and rang the bell. He heard the distinct sound of her feet crossing the floor. She flung open the door, a half smile already on her face. When she saw Dallas, she stepped back and said, "Oh . . . it's you."

Then he saw that behind her the hall was empty. The carpet had been rolled up. There were no pictures on the wall. The low table with the bowl of flowers had gone. He could smell cold emptiness.

"Come in a moment," she said, watching his face. "I'm sorry it's all rather a mess." When he stepped into the hall, her voice seemed to go echoing around. Through the lounge door, he could see furniture moved to one side, the bare parquet floor, the big empty uncurtained windows.

"As a matter of fact, I was passing quite near." He put his hands in his pockets. "And I thought I'd just pop in and——"

"Nice of you," she said, without looking at him. She made a small grimace. "As you see, though"---she waved her hand around---"I'm just in the thick of it."

"I hope you weren't expecting anyone?"

"Only the storage men."

There appeared nothing else to say. Then Charlotte seemed suddenly to remember that perhaps she might still have some polite duty towards him.

"Come into the kitchen," she said. "It's warm there. I can't offer you a drink. But I can make some tea."

He followed her through the lounge, cavernous now in the twilight. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her black slacks, walking with deliberate jauntiness. He picked his way between high crates and cases and bundles of white dust-sheets, and stacked furniture with labelled legs. In here, it smelled of scrubbing-soap and moth-killer and straw, and the dry smell of an old and long-established room disturbed.

The light was on in the kitchen. The red table-tops gleamed warm. The checked curtains were already drawn. She lit the gas and held her hands for a moment over the flame. "That's better, isn't it? It's quite cosy in here." She felt in her pocket

and brought out a battered cigarette packet. She pushed the tip of a cigarette into the jet and sucked it quickly, before putting it down on the edge of an ashtray.

"Charlotte," Dallas said, leaning against the kitchen cabinet. "What's happening? Where are you going?"

She gave a shiver of her shoulders. "I'm moving. There!" She waved at the stacked-up furniture outside. "As you can see."

He stared at her. "I thought you would have told me."

"Why?" She was looking inside the china cupboard, rattling cups and saucers and plates.

"Because you knew I'd want to know."

She shook her head. As though she had not listened to him properly she said, "I couldn't stay here."

He nodded. Quietly, persistently he said, "But where are you going?"

She played with the lid of the kettle. "I've got a bed-sitter. A very nice one. I was terribly lucky. There's not much furniture in it . . . so I'll be able to take some of the stuff from here. There's a little kitchen attached, too, so I'll keep all this. But of course a lot of things . . ." She pretended that she had burned her finger on the kettle. "Ouch, that was hot!" She smiled apologetically. There were tears in her eyes.

"Where is it?"

"Don't bark at me!" She half bridled. "It's in Notting Hill Gate." And seeing him frown, she said irritably, "It's handy for work. The rent's reasonable. And I like it."

He took out his diary and unscrewed his pen. "What's the address?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then, shrugging her shoulders: "14, Elwyn Gardens. I've got the top floor. There's a good view. The rooms are big . . . I like the sloping ceilings. And of course, being at the top, it's more private."

Steam hissed up from the stove, enveloped the kettle. Lifting it up, Charlotte poured the boiling water into the pot.

"How do I get there?"

"It's just off the Bayswater Road. About two minutes' walk from the Underground."

He nodded, put his diary away and then pulled out a chair for her. "Sit down, Charlotte. You've made the tea. Now stop fiddling around!"

She gave him a sudden sideways look in which resentment and a curious—for her—submissive gentleness seemed to blend. She sat down quietly and gracefully, and folded her hands. For the first time, there was a small spark of humour in her eyes. "Well?" she said, holding her head a little on one side and staring up at him. "Well, Captain Dallas?"

For a moment, he was utterly confused by the slight mocking tone of her voice. He sat on the edge of the table, clasping his hands round his knee. Rather peremptorily, he said, "Tell me what you've been doing."

"Working mostly."

"Living here by yourself?" He glanced through to the shadowy lounge

"Not all the time. I stayed for a while with Jean Manningham."

"How are they?" He asked it perfunctorily, wishing the Mannings had never come up, to bring their little load of sadness to reinforce the cold damp shadows outside.

"Oh, not too bad. He's improving. Slowly, of course." She was staring down at her hands, twisting her long fingers in and out of one another.

There was a long silence. She took up the cigarette, so long neglected, and stubbed it out, now not wanting it.

Dallas said gently, "Charlotte, why did you never let me see you?"

And just as gently, quite without malice she said, "Because I didn't want to see *you*."

He said slowly, "I don't think you could have said anything worse."

The colour came up under her fair skin. Fleeting, so that the expression might have been no more than a projection of his own desires, her face seemed very young, schoolgirlish, shy. Then it was cold and calm again. "You asked me," she said. "So I told you. I told you the truth."

"But not all of it."

"*All of it.*"

He put up his hand to his head in a gesture of helplessness, but she was not looking at him. Anger, irritation, the feeling of being shut out—though from what he didn't know—overwhelmed him. He got up. "Then I'd better be going."

"Don't you want your tea? It'll be ready now. I'll pour it."

"No, thank you." He suddenly felt sulky and offended. In the doorway, he turned on her and said roughly, "But why? *Why?* I can understand you might——"

She stood in front of him. "You *can't!*" She leaned forward. "You *can't* understand *anything!* Nothing! Listen! I can't *bear* to see you. I'm trying to forget. You make it all come back. Just leave me *alone!*"

He saw her mouth trembling, her whole body quivering with a miserable fury. The pupils of her eyes had expanded so that they looked black, wide and glittering, dark as water. And then echoing across the bleak expanse of unfurnished flat came two long rings on the doorbell.

She glanced quickly at Dallas. Then she made an effort to compose herself. She nipped her chin in her fingers, bit her lip, smoothed her hair. "That's the men now," she said. "For the stuff. I've been expecting them all afternoon."

She pushed past him, head in the air. Half-way through the door, she turned and said, "Don't go now. Wait till they've gone. Will you? Please?"

She didn't wait for him to answer. He heard her heels on the bare floor of the hall, the click of the turning latch. The high efficient voice said clearly, "All the stuff with the labels on. Mind the glass in that cabinet, will you? It's rather fragile."

Dallas stayed in the kitchen, sitting on the table, smoking. The whole flat now was filled with the shuffling sounds of heavy feet, the thuds of moving furniture, muttered instructions and warnings, the slow tread down the stairs, and the quick clipping up them. Once, she came in and poured two cups of tea, and took them out to the men. He didn't stir until the front door closed finally behind them, and Charlotte's feet—unwillingly it seemed, dragging a little—came back to the kitchen.

He went across to the stove, put more hot water in the tea-

pot. Then he poured out a cup, and slid it across the table to her, without glancing across. He listened to the mundane rattle of the spoon in the saucer. He relaxed a little, had steeled himself now to look at the sadness in her eyes, when he heard the sound of her sobbing.

But he didn't touch her. She rested her head on her hands, sprawling over the table in an absolute abandonment. Unnoticed, the tea steamed placidly beside her. He waited, staring up at the kitchen clock, listening to the monotony of its electric click.

Her sobs increased. Half words, broken sentences, jumbled exclamations were carried like wreckage in the torrent of her grief.

Outside, the quiet hum of the traffic had grown louder. A car or two strayed into the backwater of Quiggan Square. He heard someone's radio, a girl's laughter, somewhere below them a door slammed.

Then slowly, the flood of her misery seemed to drain away. Exhausted, unsure, she put up her hand to her face, like someone suddenly awaking in a strange place. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she covered his fingers with hers. He pulled her closer, resting her head against him, murmuring away without knowing what he said. A long way away, he glimpsed the possibility of joy, but for this moment her agony sharpened his own grief and guilt.

But there seemed nothing he could say. Certainly—now—nothing that he could do. Impatiently, he clenched his hand and more for himself than for her, he said, "Charlotte . . . you've got to put all that behind you now."

For a few moments, she said nothing. Then, moving slightly away from him, much more composed: "I'm sorry about behaving like this. I haven't done it before. It was just . . . and anyway, it was kind——" She stopped, as though aware that in these last few minutes they had moved beyond everyday expressions of apology and gratitude, that she was at a loss now how to talk to him.

"You must try to forget it. These things happen. Everybody does their best to avoid them . . . but it's heart-breaking that

it's often the smallest things——” He wondered which one of them he was trying to comfort. “A pilot knows he runs a slightly . . . a *very* slightly added risk.”

Vehemently again, she said, “I know that. After thirty-one years . . . so did he!” She clasped her hands around her knees, leaning slightly back, her voice momentarily softening. “But somehow, I always trusted father to——” She bit her lip. With a curious thick angry choke, she went on, “I knew if it was humanly possible, he'd come through all right. And now . . . to have him blamed, too! Can't you see? Hugh, Hugh!” She banged her fists on her knees. “So many lives lost! To make the ~~same~~ mistake twice, he looks such a fool . . . a fool! And he wasn't! He wasn't at all! He was a man. A great man . . . yes, a *great* man! I can't bear it for him. It's the end, the washing out of all his life, of all his work! He didn't make a mistake! He didn't! They've no right to blame him——”

“Charlotte, Charlotte.” He tried to take her hand, shocked at the rage on her face. “If he was blamed, then I'm to blame, too. I checked him out. I said he was all right.”

“And he *was* all right!”

He had a sudden urge to tell her about the hedge, of his own vague suspicions and dissatisfactions. But he had nothing really to offer her—no proof. He saw that she was looking at him with a curious thoughtfulness and compassion that he ached to return, and yet all he could say was, “The Inquiry held him responsible.”

“And I know he wasn't.” She leaned forward. “No. I'm not going to cry. I'm all right. But I just *know*. You see, I knew him better than anyone else in the world. He'd never have done anything that wasn't a hundred per cent accurate. He had a mania for it. Everything according to the Book. I tell you, the Inquiry——”

“Look, Charlotte, he said. “It wasn't the Phoenix. Even I'm quite certain there was no mechanical failure. It wasn't the weather. That only leaves the man.”

“It *wasn't* him!”

He gave her a fleeting look, partly pity, partly irritation. “There was nothing else and nobody else the Inquiry could fix it on.”

"There *must* be! It was so unlike him. It used to be a family joke. Games that I had, as a child. He'd get out the instructions. We'd play them word for word. No variations allowed. Everything was done methodically. Look!" She suddenly pulled out the drawer of the table. "I was going to throw them away . . . but look at them! Graphs of everything in the house. Gas, electricity, coal consumption! It was the same with bills, accounts. He *believed* in graphs——"

She stopped for breath. "Oh, what's the use? You don't believe me. Do you?"

Dallas rubbed his forehead. "I do, Charlotte. At least, I want to. Trouble is . . . the only way to explain it seems that he did something wrong. Something that wasn't in the Book."

"No . . . no! If he did something wrong——" Her mouth trembled, and then set in a childish unreasonable stubbornness. "It was because the Book was wrong." Triumphant now, she repeated it "That's what it was! The Book was wrong!"

He looked at her with suddenly quick dislike. Her utter ignorance of anything technical, her lack of logic was typical. The Book was sacrosanct, almost part of a religion. "Now you're being plain silly," he said sharply. "You don't know what you're talking about."

He got up and began walking up and down the small kitchen. And then he stopped, and glanced down at her bowed head. Irritation was swallowed in a painful wash of tenderness. "Forget it now, Charlotte! Give it a rest!"

Silently, she took the cigarette he offered. She started smoking it in quick jerky puffs. Her slim legs were stretched out in front of her. She stared at the tips of her soft flat shoes. "All right," she said slowly. "I won't say any more now." She looked up to give him a rather sweet conciliatory smile. "I promise."

Encouraged, he said, "Come out and have dinner." He looked at his watch. "It's not too late. Will you?"

She shook her head.

"Then I'll go out and buy something cold."

But vitality seemed to have drained out of her. Whatever moment there had been between them had gone. Sadness, guilt, the shadows of that empty lounge outside, once so full of



George Gort's gleanings, invaded and destroyed their illusion of comfort.

"As a matter of fact"—she stood up, retreating into cool politeness—"Jean Manningham said she'd drop in for supper. She's bringing something with her." And quickly, in case he should offer to stay, "We've quite a lot to talk about." Her hand was on the handle of the door. "And I expect I'll be going to bed early. My things . . . the stuff I'm keeping, go round to the bed-sitter in the morning."

He stood in the doorway uncertainly. "I don't like to leave you."

"Oh, I'm fine." She began to lead the way across the hall, down the beam of light from the open kitchen door. "It was kind of you to come."

Dallas said, "Have lunch with me tomorrow?" And when she hesitated, "Yes, that's fixed. I'll pick you up. Here?"

"No. Not here. I'll be gone by then. I'll be settling myself in . . . coming back and forth . . . I don't know where I'll be. I think perhaps *not* tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. Come round to my flat when you're ready. Here!" He brought out an old envelope from his pocket and tore off the address. "It's easy to find. The new flats by Olympia. It doesn't matter how late. There's a restaurant downstairs. We can get lunch any time."

As though she was too tired to argue, she said, "Thank you. That would be nice."

She stood in the doorway of the flat, watching him go down the stairs. He didn't turn round to wave. But he heard the soft click of the door as he turned the corner out of sight.

Outside, he was surprised to find it so warm. He crossed the pavement, feeling a mild soft drizzle on his face. He glanced around and up at the sky, heavy and oppressive with its curtain of overcast. His footsteps seemed to echo forlornly along the wet deserted pavement of Quiggan Square.

Even the inside of the car was clammy with the seeping damp. He got in, and drive away quickly, hunching over the wheel, staring ahead of him, reacting automatically to the traffic, his mind struggling with an oppression as blanketing as the night outside.

He drove along, stopping, starting, slowing, accelerating—the very act of movement vaguely soothing his spirit with the illusion of getting on, of something being done. He turned along the Embankment, driving east. Past the Waterloo bridge, he drew the car into the kerb and got out and slammed the door.

It was raining harder. He pulled up the collar of his coat, hurrying on, feeling the sharp tingle of the rain, smelling the water of the river, groping in his mind for something. Dimly, like a small alien pellet that it strove to expel, was something—some clue, some idea. But what?

He turned around and walked back towards the car. Was it something that he missed in Gort's Check? Something someone had said? That he'd read? Given neither to imagination nor much introspection, the process of remembrance both angered and tired him. He rested his arms on the wet stone of the parapet, staring down at the ruffles of the rain on the black sheen of the Thames.

Swiftly, darkly, soothingly the dark water slightly swirled and fled past him. Behind, an occasional car hissed along the Embankment, footsteps came and went. Across the river, lights of buildings leapt up against the thick sky on either side of the great span of the bridge. Gold lit buses came and went. The white cones of car headlights flashed up and died away. To the east there were the dark shadows of ships, their navigation lights moving gently with the quiet flow of the river. Perhaps a mile away, a ship's siren swelled and faded mournfully.

Restlessly, Dallas turned away. And then suddenly he had a quick picture of Charlotte in the kitchen. He heard again her high angry voice say, "That's what it was! The Book was wrong!" And like a soundless landslide in his mind, events suddenly shivered, changed emphasis, slowly subsided into place.

He walked back to the car, standing in front of it for a long time staring at the black pavement, unaware of the rain trickling down the back of his neck, of the curious glance of the occasional passer-by.

It couldn't be wrong. How could it? He'd taught all the pilots on just that take-off technique. He'd had no trouble. They'd had no trouble.

But had they? He knew enough of the pilot mind to realise that it shut out near-misses, avoided as far as it could the very smell of trouble.

Dallas got into the car, started the engine, turned on the wind-screen wipers impatiently, as though they could swish and slice their way through the mist in his mind. Big jet aircraft were new. And all new things' had odd tricks and unforecasted characteristics that only time disclosed. All aeroplanes had their teething troubles. And that was it. Something had happened that no one had thought of.

Something to do with the Book.

It *must* be the combination of a full load and a very hot temperature. What was all right for one climate wasn't for another. What if, given such a take-off was marginal, there was some small factor that had been overlooked? It could easily happen, even in such a splendid aircraft as the Phoenix. Thousands of calculations and details must be remembered and taken into consideration in a jet airliner project. Even such a great brain as Pickering's was, after all, human. No one could ever be considered infallible, and mathematics didn't always produce the answers. Nor could tests go on for ever, otherwise nothing would be produced. But wasn't it a fact that Atlas had started to do more trials?

He bit his lip, easing the car along the Embankment. Once again, the movement soothed him. Tiny fragments that his memory seemed to have stored away against such a time as this came easily to the surface. Braddock and his criticism of the wing shape, Gort's utter confidence at the first Inquiry, the repeated whining of the wind tunnel, the new—and still unknown—modifications on the Mark II.

He accelerated hard. His mind returned to that piece of hedge which proved that there had at least been one near-miss on take-off.

He drove 'round in circles. The city was settling down for the night. The wide wet streets were emptying. The bright lights stayed. In his mind, the pieces were still holding together. In some curious way, they were interconnected. He felt the sudden exhilaration of discovery.

He glanced up as he passed Westminster. The face of Big Ben showed midnight. Exhilaration died away. Another day gone. Another day here. Along the hot and dusty Eastern Route, Phoenixes would be flying, landing, taking-off---

Grimly, he turned the nose of the car—westwards towards his home.

**23** At the other end of the line, the Operations Officer's voice came back with crisp first-thing-in-the-morning efficiency "Yes, Captain Dallas . . . of course. The names of the Phoenix captains on stand-off now are . . . Bateson, Creighton, Knight. Phone numbers? Yes, sir. I'll read them out. Do you want Captain Braddock's as well?"

Dallas wrote the numbers down carefully on the paper in front of him. When the Operations Officer had rung off, he started to call them up—one after the other. And there he ran into difficulties.

Creighton was out for the day. Knight was up in Yorkshire. Bateson—a number in Surrey. He heard the different girls' voices from the intermediate exchanges, then the long *ring ring*. He began to run his finger round the neck of his collar, frowning down, tapping his pencil against the table. There was a rattle on his flat door, and the woman who cleaned for him let herself in. He gave her a brief smile and a nod as she passed with exaggerated quietness to hang her clothes in the cupboard.

"I'm sorry," the operator said. "There is no reply from your number."

There remained only Braddock. The same exchange as his. He dialled the number. If Braddock was in, he'd get him to come round. He lived only a mile away.

With a loud clank the phone came alive. "Flaxman 2034." Braddock's landlady. "Oh, no I'm sorry . . . he left an hour ago. He told me he was going about his licence to the Ministry of Transport and . . ."

Dallas cut her short. "When will he be back? You don't

know? Well, when he does come, get him to contact me. Dallas. Tell him it's urgent."

As one by one the doors seemed to close again, he felt a sickening qualm almost of panic. Finally, he repeated his call to the airport. The same Operations Officer answered. Yes, of course he would ask any Phoenix pilot he saw to ring Captain Dallas. Yes, he'd ring round the other Sections and tell them the same.

Dallas walked over to his desk, opened it and pulled out his Phoenix manuals. In his bookcase were a couple of books on aerodynamics. He brought them out and pored over them. From time to time, he glanced at the phone on his lounge table, frowning across at it as though some mechanical failure had precluded its ringing.

His daily woman let herself out with a slightly offended creaking quiet. Outside, the traffic thickened. The lift sighed up and down more often. Pencil in hand, Dallas made rough sketches, and then scratched them out again. The phone remained silent.

When there was a knock on his door, he bounded across the carpet and flung it open. He had forgotten that he had invited Charlotte. She stood in the doorway shyly. Her cheeks were reddened with the wind outside. She was wearing a tweed coat and long suede gloves. When she saw him hesitate, she smiled. "May I come in? You asked me, you know."

He stood back, watching her almost unwillingly. She had never looked more beautiful, and it was as though his mind, scrabbling to hold a faint grasp of its problem, both desired and resented her appearance.

She walked slowly in, glanced around, and as he helped her off with her coat said, "I like your flat, Hugh." She laid her gloves on the sofa with her bag. She looked out of the window, seeing the back of another block of flats, white tiles stained rusty brown, and part of the grey facade of Olympia.

"Not a room with a view," he said, meeting her eyes and smiling.

"But nice all the same."

Dallas wanted to say something complimentary, but because

his admiration was so intense, he found that the familiar easy words he'd used so often now refused to come. Instead he said, "What will you drink, Charlotte?" He opened the sideboard door. "Sherry, gin . . . out of whisky I'm afraid."

Fleeting, her large eyes rested on the pile of books and sketches and graphs. "Sherry, please."

He took it over to her. "Cheers," he said. "Well, how did it go this morning?"

"Oh, all right." And with sudden simplicity. "It's nice that it's done now. I feel better."

"Once you're settled in——" He moved his hands vaguely.

"Oh, yes, I'll get to like it a lot. It looks more home-like already." Dallas sat down opposite her on a low stool, swirling his drink around in his hand. He avoided looking at her. Their relationship had progressed so oddly. Not just the normal week-by-week dinner and theatre dates, getting to know one another on the top artificial social layer. It had advanced like a tide over an uneven shore, making vast pools of knowledge of one another, leaving blank sand flats of strangeness. Now, dragged down by the problem that his mind wrestled with, he could think of nothing else at all to say.

As though aware of it, she talked gently of the flat, admired a picture, a lampshade, the warm nut-brown of the carpet. She told him the odd anecdote of her work with the doctor. She allowed him to refill her glass and offered him one of her cigarettes.

She heard the knock on the door before he did. "So you *were* expecting someone else!" She smiled, watching him walk across the lounge to open it. He was keeping his fingers crossed that it was Braddock.

It was. Red-faced, good-humoured, and not indisposed for a drink and a talk. He took off his Company raincoat and put it on to a peg, pulled down the sleeves of his jacket, patted his hair. "Mrs. Midgeley said you wanted to see me *urgent*. And as she was talking to her sister on the phone, thought it was faster to come along round." Then he caught sight of Charlotte and went redder and began mumbling about dropping in some other time.

Dallas gave him a little push in across the lounge.

"Charlotte, this is Captain Braddock. Charlotte Gort, Dick."

Braddock made heavy weather of not recognising her name.

Charlotte said, "I think I've seen you at the airport, when I came up with my father." She handed him her cigarette-case. They settled themselves down with the business of lights and ashtrays and what will you have?

"Hugh——" Charlotte stood up. "You and Dick want to talk. Would you like me to go?" And when he shook his head, "Then I'll get myself a book . . . you've got lots over here. And I'll sit out of your way on the couch by the window." She knelt down in front of his long bookcase, "Then you can forget I'm here. I never hear a word when I'm reading."

She pulled out a couple of books and said, "There! I'm ready."

Braddock watched her with obvious admiration. Speaking quietly, Dallas leaned towards him. "Look, this is important. And I want you to think carefully."

Braddock pursed his lips and nodded.

"How many Phoenix take-offs have you done?"

Braddock rubbed his head. "Couple of dozen, I suppose."

"How many of those on the route?"

"Two . . . no, sorry . . . three altogether."

Dallas dropped his voice. "Any from Ranjibad?"

Braddock shook his head. "Watched plenty, though."

"How many?"

Braddock grinned. "Now you're asking. Haven't you heard of me? I'm the bod that never finishes his training. Permanent third pilot. I've watched more take-offs and landings and done less real work than anyone in the Company."

Dallas didn't smile back. "Notice anything about them?"

"The take-offs?"

"Yes."

Braddock stubbed out his cigarette, and began patting his pockets, searching for another. Impatiently, Dallas pushed the box across the low table to him. Over the top of Braddock's head, he glanced across the room at Charlotte. Oblivious, she was curled up on the sofa, shoes kicked off, deep in her book.

He saw Braddock's eyes take in the long legs, the delicate ankles and smile approvingly.

"Did you?" Dallas said sharply.

"Why, yes." Braddock drew on his cigarette. "Nothing much though. A trick some of them have." He eased the ash off his cigarette with scrupulous care. "They don't all do it. Knight doesn't. I don't think Ford——" He screwed up his eyes with the pain of trying to remember accurately.

"What do they do?" Dallas said, his words coming slowly, as though by that tempo he could put a brake on the sudden surge of feeling inside him.

"Two things really," Braddock said. "First . . . the nose-wheel. They keep it on the ground well after 75 knots"

The drawled words, lobbed quietly across the table, burst into Dallas' mind like exploding shells. Hoping for them, half expecting them, nevertheless they filled him now with a curious horror.

"And the unstick speed," Braddock went on. "They calculate it from the graph all right, and normally they use it to become airborne. But——"

"When it's really not, and they're very heavy, they take no notice of it?"

Braddock looked uncomfortable. "I wouldn't say that——"

"They add seven or eight knots to it?"

"Why, yes." Braddock looked even more uncomfortable. "That's about it."

"In fact . . . they don't take off according to the Book?"

The Australian took a mouthful of beer and swallowed it slowly. "They don't set out to take-off that way," he said, as though to defend them. "They do it by feel . . . you know how it is . . . instinct, if you like." He raised his hands and lowered them a few times as though judging weight. "They must reckon what the Phoenix wants to do."

"Must use a lot more runway."

"Well . . . yes."

"And the nose-wheel on the ground so long. Must give the cockpit a terrific shaking."

Braddock grinned. "Real rattletrap."



"How many captains have you flown with?"

"Let me see . . . four or five. And look, as I told you, they don't *all* do it."

"Most of them do, though." Dallas stared down at the carpet. Suddenly the solution of the riddle of Gort's two fatal take-offs was beginning to unfold in front of him. He pressed his hands against his head. But why was the Book take-off wrong? What happened exactly to the aircraft at maximum all-up weight in very hot temperatures? "Ever ask any of them about it?"

"Sure. Asked Creighton. Said he didn't. When I said . . . hell, I'd had a free vibro-electric massage, he got quite annoyed. Muttered something about that was his technique anyway . . . and different machines handled differently."

Half to himself, Dallas said angrily, "God . . . why didn't they tell me?"

"Hope I haven't been talking out of turn." Again Braddock looked acutely uncomfortable. "Something I noticed. A tip, I thought. You know when you're new how you pick up things on the Route——" He drank his beer, and put down the empty glass. Then he glanced behind him at Charlotte, as though mindful of keeping her waiting.

"Another drink?" Dallas said.

"Thanks, no. I better be getting along." He stood up. "Unless there's anything else?"

"No," Dallas said. "That's the lot."

"And there's no question really of breaking any rules." Braddock seemed worried now at the cold withdrawn expression on Dallas' face. "It's just——"

"Individual technique," Dallas said drily.

"You can't blame them——"

"Sure. No. Thanks for telling me."

Braddock stood there, not knowing quite what to do. "Is that what's urgent? Is the Book wrong?"

"Tell you about it later."

Braddock took this as his cue to start moving. He advanced shyly towards Charlotte, who looked up from her book. He shook hands with her. "See you again sometime, I hope."

In the doorway, Dallas said, "When are you out again, Dick? Next week? Pop in and see me before you go, eh?"

He closed the door slowly, to give himself time to think before coming back into the lounge. But before he could say anything, Charlotte had got up from the sofa and was putting on her gloves. "I'll go then."

He looked at her in surprise. "What d'you mean?"

"Something's up. I can tell. Funny"—she looked at him sadly—"but I *know* you. I can tell things about you. You don't want to have lunch, do you? Not now."

He hesitated. "It's just . . . well, I thought of going over to Atlas. I rather want——"

"Aren't you going to phone?"

"No. I'd rather go over. Pickering has a habit of being . . . well, unavailable."

"You've discovered something, haven't you? Something about the Phoenix you didn't know before? Something about the take off?"

"Not exactly discovered." He smiled at her ruefully. "But there's something Pickering should know."

"Then you better tell him straight away."

"First we'll have lunch."

"No." She was getting her coat. "I can get something myself." She put her hand on his arm. "You want to go, don't you?"

"It's rather urgent, Charlotte."

"Then we'll have lunch together some other time." She moved over to the door. She said quietly, "You'll tell me sometime, won't you?"

"Of course I will. As soon as I know more about it myself." He stopped. "Look, about lunch, I do feel——"

But she already had the door opened. Seeing that her mind was made up, he helped her on with her coat. He said. "Anyway, I'll come down with you. I've got the car outside."

He dropped her in Kensington High Street. He would phone her up, he said. They could meet somewhere. As he drove away, she smiled and lifted up her gloved hand and waved.

All the eighteen miles to the factory airfield, Dallas was turning over in his mind the extraordinary news that Braddock

had told him. That there was something more behind it was obvious. Something to do with the lift of the wing. He would ask Pickering. One thing that must be straightened out immediately was the take-off technique.

The usual policeman was on the gate. Recognising Dallas, he unlocked it, and let him through. The pilot parked his car in his former place, and then walked up the stairs to the office on the first floor. Understanding the delaying and avoiding tactics of secretaries, he went straight into the office marked *Nigel Pickering, Chief Designer*, through the glass door that gave out into the corridor.

Pickering was not in. There was the same desk, cluttered up with papers, as untidy as ever. He glanced over it: saw manuals, drawings, glue, a railway time table, a box of paper clips and a stack of pencils. He was just about to go across to the secretary's office, when he saw a blue file cover marked: *Khartoum Trials on Phoenix I*.

He put his hand over for it immediately. He flicked it open. All he saw staring up at him was the blue cardboard of the back of the file.

It was empty.

Slowly, he closed the file cover again. There was something almost sinister, it seemed to him, about that emptiness. Over that doubled up piece of blue cardboard hung an aura of uneasiness. He walked across the linoleum and opened the secretary's door. She looked up, surprised, as he said, "Any idea when Mr. Pickering's likely to be in?"

"He's away, Captain Dallas. He's in Birmingham at the moment. Some sub-contractor——"

"When will he be back?"

"He's coming in tomorrow afternoon."

"What time?"

"About three, I think."

"I'll be here at three tomorrow, then. I want to see him. And . . . tell him it's urgent, would you?"

He could not get it out of his mind. Wherever he looked-

gradually coming in front of everything his eyes turned to—those two moments of memory were superimposed on all he saw. The blue file cover of the Khartoum Trials lying closed on the desk. And then open—with nothing inside it.

As he drove up to London, through the damp suburbs, then across the river; he tried to shake the whole thing off as nothing. Somebody might have taken the report away to read it. Pickering was careless with papers, often untidy. It was probably lying somewhere in the office, separated from its thin cardboard protection.

And yet it was one more incident that for some obscure reason connected itself to the chain of circumstances already hanging together in his mind.

The hot weather trials must obviously concern high temperatures: in which conditions the most vitally affected aircraft characteristic was the take-off: and the most critical take-off was at maximum all-up weight.

Yet that vital report wasn't safe where it should be. Why?

He put the car in the garage and walked slowly up to his flat. He lit the gas-fire, and sat for a moment, watching the blue and yellow flames gradually redden, again tantalised by the beginnings of so many and different ideas on where exactly the Book could be wrong.

He was not by any means an expert on aerodynamics. He was aware of the immense gaps in his knowledge. But he had some books on the subject, had read articles, kept up with design problems as outlined in the aviation press. Now, he got up from the armchair, and going over to the shelves, selected a couple of books and the Phoenix Operations Manual. He took out a pencil and made some notes on the back of an envelope.

The triangular wing—obviously there was less lift in the tips. But what if there was something else connected with those two sharp angles? He remembered reading in a journal only a few weeks ago that swept-back wings might have a tip-stalling tendency. Any sort of stalling tendency meant less lift, and less lift might well mean the difference between a very heavy aircraft staying on the ground or rising into the air. Especially on a hot night, when the air was thin, adversely affecting lift

performance even further. When he thought about it, he could see that the tip-stalling tendency was bound to go up sharply with the incidence of the wing, and with weight and temperature. What if the tip-stalling "infected" the whole wing, so that the aircraft had a "ground-stall characteristic" at a higher speed than the stall at altitude?

Yes, that *must* be it. The unstick speed must be nearly coincident with the stalling speed in conditions of maximum all-up weight and high temperature. That would mean that everything was fine under normal conditions: the Book would be perfectly right, *except* under that combination. A maximum all-up weight take-off on the Phoenix had been comparatively rare. So had a very high temperature. There had, of course, been a number of them; but by luck, they had been done by pilots who unconsciously, almost intuitively, had realised that it was better to keep the nose-wheel on the ground to lessen drag and not to attempt to unstick till well beyond the speeds given by the Book. But not Gort. It would be his nature to follow the Book meticulously. He must have tried to get airborne *before* he reached safe flying speed, and by so doing—long after it was possible to stop—had become involved in a ground stall over which he would have little control.

Excited by what he had discovered, now suddenly he stopped. Pickering would know all that. He would have made tests, and then further tests. A frown came over Dallas' face.

And then he remembered the wind tunnel, whining out so late at night and so often. The tip-stalling tendency might possibly have shown itself on the model, but Pickering might easily have put it down to the vagaries of wind tunnels generally, due to greater viscosity. Also, there was no temperature control over the air in the wind tunnel, and it might not have been realised how much the tip-stalling effect would increase at high temperatures.

Pickering would naturally have stuck out for his beautiful design. And anyway he would have been justified in assuming that ground effect—which is the cushioning given to aircraft by close proximity to the ground—would provide extra lift on take-off by subtracting eight or nine knots from the stalling

speed, and would widen the gap between unstick and stall. But what if, even there, the shape of the wing was unlucky, and the turbulence was increased by the accumulations of shedding vorticity close to the wing tip? That might even have the completely reverse effect.

Dallas closed the books. He put the pencil back in his pocket. It was a theory that explained a great many things; like string, it seemed to hold together all those events of the past few months. And if there was any truth in it, out of justice to Gort it was essential that the Inquiry should be re-opened.

It was a theory—not scientific in the way Pickering understood the term. But at least he could give the designer—just as soon as he could get to see him—the chance of pulling it to pieces.

24 Deliberately, Pickering avoided looking at Dallas. Not because he was afraid to meet the pilot's eyes, but to give his own eyes time for some of the anger to die out of them. He was aware of Dallas' watchful stillness. Aware that he was assessing every word and every movement. The usual cigarette hung pendulous on the designer's lower lip, waiting to go into action.

"Anyway"—Dallas clipped the jottings together and tossed them on Pickering's desk—"that's what I made of it." And tempting him: "I may be wrong."

"It's an interesting theory."

"It's the right one, *isn't it?*"

For a moment, Pickering looked at him with genuine astonishment. Did he really think that it was as easy as all that? This is right, that's wrong. What are you going to do about it? God! He stroked his head. Imprisoned by the vast web of his knowledge, he struggled for some simple way through which to communicate with this pilot.

"We've got Robinson's evidence that he got the nose up high."

"Very doubtful if he could see properly from where he was standing." Dallas shrugged his shoulders. "It's possible Gort

might have got the nose higher than the desired optimum. But that's easy for anyone to do on a dark night with no horizon and no mechanical means to help him. And anyway, you can't blame him because there's no definition in the Book limiting the amount of wing incidence on take-off."

"All the same——"

"It they weren't identical, the Book unstick speeds and the stall under those conditions must have been close. Closer than you thought. *Far* too close!"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"I'm sure you wouldn't." There was almost contempt now in Dallas' voice. He tapped the papers with his fingers. "I don't say that's the whole truth. I don't suppose anybody . . . not even you . . . knows that yet. You'll be still testing. But it's *roughly* right."

Pickering shook his head, not so much in denial as to shake off the pilot's probings, to preserve the quiet balance of his mind against these coarse shakings. Yes, all right, there was too much involved. It wasn't a taunt. It was a fact. But he couldn't stop the involvement. The business of building aircraft was an edifice, an empire. He might be the designer, but he was imprisoned in its structure. He couldn't rush out, years later, and shout *hold everything*. His dreams were already frozen into metal, and metal they stood. And supposing he could alter . . . sometimes in comparatively minor ways *had* to alter . . . it was not necessarily for the better. The second idea must be tested again and again like the first. He was human and fallible. Like Dallas opposite him was. And like every other human being, *his* visions had *his* flaws.

"Then," Dallas said sharply, "tell me where I'm wrong."

"I'm not going to try."

"Why not?"

"Because," he heard his own voice go up a key, "until you've had a university course in aerodynamics, you wouldn't *begin* to understand." Red-faced, he glanced at Dallas, watching the pilot raise his eyebrows with apparently deliberate disbelief. And then in haste to be rid of him, he said, "As a matter of fact——"

There he stopped.

Dallas was lighting a cigarette. He paused for a second with the match raised. He kept his eyes on Pickering's face. "Go on."

The designer touched the notes on his desk. "For some time past, we've been looking into the possibility of changing the take-off technique to this."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Outside, a lorry changed gear. A bubble of air hissed in the hot-water radiator. Then Dallas said softly, "God, so you *did* know!" He snapped the match in his fingers. "*You knew!*"

It was as though, in flight from Dallas' bulldozing unscientific theories, Pickering had been fed a morsel to ensure his escape. And now he was confounded by it. "We didn't *know*! You don't *know*! None of us *know*!" He leaned across the desk, his face furious. This pilot would never realise what it meant and what it cost to wrench knowledge out of the air, to grope forward for facts and enlightenment, and haul truth out of the darkness into the daylight. "We obviously want to avoid excessive nose-high attitude due to pilot handling. But before we authorise anything, we have to have the facts. Till then, we can do nothing."

"So that's what you were doing with the aircraft when we wanted them for Training." Dallas stared down at the floor. Then he jerked up his head and said, "Well, I want the new technique in the Book *now*."

"We can't authorise it just like"—Pickering snapped his fingers—"that."

"Someone else might do the same as Gort."

"We've got to *test*. You pilots! You know *nothing*! No, worse . . . you know a *fraction*. We've had to find out whether the nose oleo will stand it. It was never intended to. For a machine that size, its design is extremely fragile. And the tyres . . . they're small, not designed for high-speed rotation. *We* can't say this seems to be wrong . . . so the other way's *got* to be right. We're not *pilots*, we're *scientists*."

Surprisingly, Dallas said nothing.

"These things have to be tested and tested again. Yet we're competing with fine aircraft like the Comet and the American



707, and still we've got to be in the front of the race . . . the biggest, the fastest jet airliner——” Pickering’s voice trailed away. His mind slid back into the many chambers of his mind, where philosophy and science fused in one whole, harmonious to him, inexpressible to others. Like the so-called Christian heritage, you were born in sin, disease and death. And yet you learned. Each day, from the moment you were born. By trial and pain and error. You fell down in error and pain and yet you crawled up the higher over them. And life and progress went on. A child burned its fingers and the pain was printed as knowledge on the cells of its brain. You didn’t throw up your hands and quench all fires because of an inch of scorched skin. And the child survived because now it recognised danger.

He was old enough to remember his brother, a doctor, discussing the tragedy of Lubeck, the trail of the anti-T.B. vaccine. Many people had died, but in the end the lesson was learned, the vaccine was perfected. A surgeon found new techniques, they weren’t operating now exactly as they did five years ago. There were new anaesthetics, new drugs . . . and how did they *know* their curative properties if they didn’t first take the risk of trying them? Onwards, stumbling over mistakes and errors, the march of progress went on.

Pickering drew his hand across his eyes. So Gort and a number of people had died. In his own mind, now he went so far as to think that if the Book take-off technique had been different there was a *possibility* they might not have died. But you found these things out as you went along. Knowledge unfolded itself slowly. You couldn’t skip and jump through knowledge like this pilot opposite him was wanting to. As a small boy, he remembered vividly his mother dying of pneumonia . . . and if they’d known then of antibiotics, she would still have lived. But that knowledge had not then been wrested from time. It was all a question of where you were in the march of progress.

And where man progressed, he walked the thin tight-rope over danger.

He became aware of Dallas’ cold voice needling him. He turned his bemused eyes upon him.

"I said, while I'm here, I'd like to see the report on the trials at Khartoum."

"Which report?"

"Don't tell me you haven't got one, because the file was on your desk the last time I was in here."

"Wonder to me . . . the way you've been prying around, you didn't look inside for yourself."

"I did. It wasn't there."

"Wasn't it?" The designer gave a short laugh. "I don't know where it is then."

"I'll hunt it up."

Pickering shook his head. Irritation overcame him. "No. You can't see it."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't authorise it. That's why!" Pickering detached the burning butt from his lip and stubbed it out in the ashtray. "These particulars are the Company's property. Anyway, they're highly technical."

They watched each other, not speaking. Outside, the sunshine had faded. The November evening was falling fast. One after the other, lights were being switched on in the hundreds of workshops and offices and halls all around them. Dallas said at last, "Anyway, you agree to us changing the take-off procedure in the Book?"

"I told you . . . I can't authorise it officially yet. I'll let you know."

"Better make it soon."

"It will be soon."

Pickering clicked over the switch of his desk lamp. And then, as though the sudden stark brightness was too much for him, he got up and walked to the window. There he stood, with his hands in his pockets, his head bowed, staring out at the blaze of the factory in front of him; hearing the sounds of the activities of ten thousand men, the everlasting hum of machines. A slight frost had already come up, shining and sparkling among all that illumination.

Then he turned. His eyes had the wide staring quality of sleeplessness, but his movements had lost their jerkiness. When

he spoke, his voice was quiet. "I have to live five years . . . ten years ahead. What I thought of years ago is only just coming into realisation."

"I know."

"And there will be changes . . . improvements——"

More sharply, Dallas said, "And sometimes the wrong person will get blamed because of them."

Pickering swung himself on his heels. "I never really blamed Gort."

"Of course you did! When he went back——"

"I didn't want it to happen again . . . that's all. Anyway, you blamed him yourself the first time. You make changes as you go along, don't you?"

Dallas made an impatient gesture of brushing Pickering's remark aside. "Whether you blame him now or not . . . *the Inquiry did.*"

"Oh, these Inquiries! They're just to find out who pays the insurance." He shrugged his shoulders. "And what is blame, anyway? Just the pound of flesh the public demands."

"And when they take it from the wrong person?"

"I wonder," Pickering said, "who is the *right* person?"

Dallas stood up. In a sudden rush of anger, he said, "You pride yourself on your proven facts, but where're your facts, where's your precious truth, if you'll never admit that *you* might be wrong? There is no wrong when it comes to *you* . . . it's modifications, improvements, progress!"

Pickering turned away.

They stood there, apart—two human beings with two different purposes in the same project, brought together now into the same present with two different views on a similar sad past.

Pickering kept still, kept silent. Impossible to express that you were impelled forward in your work only by an overwhelming urge to fulfil whatever gifts you had for the benefit and progress and future of mankind. Impossible to express that given you did such a job to the utmost of your power, you must be granted the blessed absolution necessitated by the very frailty of that power.

But to Dallas' mind, seeing with a cruel clarity one side of

the picture but denied the experience of the other, it seemed as he watched the designer standing there so quietly, that Pickering had in some strange way become identified with his own invention, had become part of the millions of pounds worth of orders for the Phoenix, part of the blazing lights of the factory behind him, now working at full pressure. He had started all this, now he could not stop it. He was being swept along by the tremendous power latent in that beautiful conception of speed that had flashed through his mind four years ago.

Dallas said, "I am haunted by the vision of a man trying to get airborne. And failing, because he did what I told him."

"We all of us . . . I suppose . . . have our own private nightmares."

The pilot slowly buttoned his coat. "I tell you—I shall do my damndest to get the Inquiry re-opened."

"You'll get nowhere."

"I think I will."

"You'll be banging your head against a brick wall."

Dallas looked at him steadily. "I've felt that wall already."

He started towards the door. Just before he reached it, suddenly and quietly, Pickering said, "Hugh——"

He stopped. He ached to express some glimmerings of his own difficulties and frustrations, some of the belief that gave him purpose in life, some idea of how much responsibility his mind could accept and still leave it clear and functioning. He searched his mind for words—the right words. But for all his seeking, the only words he could find to say were: "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry I can't help you."

**25** Pickering had promised he would work fast. Dallas had not expected, however, the results of his interview to manifest themselves quite so soon. Monday morning, on his desk was a telegram from Atlas Aviation: URGENT. TAKE-OFF TECHNIQUE ON PHOENIX I AIRCRAFT TO BE CHANGED FORTHWITH. EIGHT KNOTS TO BE ADDED TO ALL UNSTICK

SPEEDS GIVEN BY THE GRAPHS. NOSE-WHEEL TO BE KEPT ON THE GROUND UNTIL JUST BEFORE THE UNSTICK<sup>d</sup> SPEED IS REACHED. ALL PILOTS AT PRESENT ON SERVICE, TO BE WARNED IMMEDIATELY.

He had stared down at it grimly for a few minutes before taking it into Judd's office.

Judd had been concerned. But his concern was to get the signals off to Rome, Cairo, Ranjibad, Calcutta and Singapore, and to see that all the Books were altered accordingly. When he had given those staccato instructions to the Sections involved, he sat back in the Fleet Superintendent's chair, and said, "Well, that's done then," as though a dangerous situation had been scotched, a modification introduced—there had been so many in every aircraft—that would now mean a stride nearer towards the 100 per cent millenium of service with safety that every airline was striving for. No more to be considered than a rewiring job, a new type of oil, an alteration of a switch to make it more foolproof.

Dallas said, "What about Gort . . . now?"

"What about him, Hugh?"

"Don't you see . . . what happened to him could have happened to you? Very nearly did?"

"I think you're exaggerating a bit."

Dallas said hotly, "I'm not at all! I saw Pickering on Thursday." And he gave the Fleet Superintendent in careful detail his theory of ground-stalling on the Phoenix that the designer had neither confirmed nor denied.

He watched Judd's face for a reaction, but he found none. When he had finished, he said, "What are we going to do?"

"Do?" Judd waved his hand at what had already been done; his own Book altered, the written advice he had made of having notified Sections and Stations. "There's nothing more to do. Everything's all right now."

"But ~~this~~!" Dallas furiously waved the telegram in Judd's face. "Now the take-off technique has been officially changed . . . can Gort be left to take the full responsibility? God . . . don't you see? The Inquiry . . . we've got to get it re-opened!"

Judd picked up a pencil and began rotating it in his fingers.

"No," he said. "No. We can't go through that again. Nothing would be served."

"But we've got to do something for Gort!"

Judd gave a slow sad smile. "We can't do anything for him now, Hugh."

"Christ!" Dallas said, appalled by the lack of real feeling he saw in the face in front of him. "We can't have his name branded with pilot error . . . after this!"

"There's more in it than that."

"Yes . . . eighty million pounds' worth of orders! Bad publicity for the Airline! Bad publicity for the Phoenix! All *that's* in it . . . so Gort's good name can go!"

He was shaking with bitterness and fury. Though he had not expected willing co-operation from Pickering, he thought as a pilot, Judd's sympathy would be with Gort, especially after his own near-miss. He railed against him now, trying to evoke a spark of his own passion.

All that he got was a wooden-faced blankness. Not even the glimmerings of anger or resentment. Judd was now in his official position, and he was dealing with this officially. That is to say with tact, with patience, controlling his own feelings with admirable restraint for the good of the community as a whole. He did say, rather wistfully, "This wouldn't have happened if you'd only listened to me, Hugh."

"Of course it would have happened . . . eventually!" Dallas retorted. "Not to Gort . . . but maybe to *you*!"

Judd's eyes altered their focus from the figure four feet away from him to the infinity of imagined years ahead. "You've got to take the long view. Look to the future."

"The future?" Stung by this complacent mouthing of a good-time's-coming, Dallas almost shouted: "There isn't going to *be* a future if this sort of thing's allowed to go on! This is *our* corner of life . . . and *this* happens! What about the thousands of other corners in England? Does the same sort of thing happen there, too? And what God-awful sort of picture comes out when all those corners are put together?"

But Judd refused to allow himself to consider any sort of picture, except his own vision of the Phoenix Fleet. He would

not move from the position he had already taken up. Inquiries were unpleasant for everybody: they were expensive: they never did anyone any good: they were only a sop, anyway.

Dallas felt again that sensation he had had with Pickering. The wall he had banged there had not given an inch. Now he was banging another wall, on the other side—and that, too, did not move. There were two other walls: the President and the pilots themselves. And now he said, realising that with Judd, obsessed as the man was, he was wasting his time: “I shall tell the pilots. We’ll act together.”

Perhaps it was the memory of other times the pilots had *acted together* in the past that caused the slight smile on Judd’s thin lips and the immediate invitation, readily given: “Do that!”

“And I shall tell the President.”

“I think he should be told . . . certainly.”

Busy though he was, with work mounting now on top of him from all sides, Dallas went to see the President that same afternoon. Contrary to his expectations, he was allowed into the august office straightaway. He was received very affably. At first, he had not been able to get into the lead of the conversation, for it was assumed that he was calling about the expansion of his Training Section that was already taking place.

When at last he managed to mention the real purpose of his visit, the President’s mood underwent a sudden change. He listened with a grave face as Dallas outlined his theory, described his unsuccessful interview with Pickering, and produced the telegram detailing the new take-off procedure. Then, in understanding, he said, “As Captain Gort’s instructor, you have a special . . . well, *concern* in this. I do see that! I do see that!”

But he did not see quite so easily when the subject of reopening the Inquiry was brought up. A slight frown came over his face. He shifted a little in his seat. “The Inquiry?”

No burning zeal glowed out of those eyes to go to the aid of Gort’s good name. It crossed Dallas’ mind that perhaps more was known than that correctly concerned face was allowing itself to register.

“These Inquiries, Dallas . . . very delicate things. Their purpose is . . . well, *complicated*.”

"Isn't it to find out the true cause of an accident? And to publish the findings to safeguard against repetition?"

"Of course! Of course! Those two aims are their primary intention."

"Then it doesn't appear . . . does it, sir . . . that the two Phoenix Inquiries succeeded."

"More in it than that. Much more." The President paused for a moment, as though privately chewing over just *how* much more. Then he lowered his voice almost to a whisper: "Politics."

Dallas made his own suggestion: "Could you see the Minister, sir?"

"The Minister's a very busy man." The President looked across the desk as though he was studying the effect of that remark. And then: "You know . . . I'm glad you've come and got this off your chest to me."

Dallas flushed. He disliked this sudden father confessor attitude, this benediction to go happily away and get on with his own job. But now, just at the moment when he was beginning to think he was again getting nowhere, the President became more sympathetic. He understood what he called "the position". And before the pilot left, he felt cheerful enough to be almost optimistic.

There were definite signs that here was not so much a brick wall as it looked. It gave the appearance of being about to move. There might be results, there might be help for Gort in this quarter. In fact, he had a promise. Before he left, the President said, "I'll do all I can. I'll give you my word that something will be done."

I've misjudged him, Dallas thought, as he walked along the long corridors, down the stairs. He really means what he says. The idea that now he had such a powerful ally cheered him. He felt that already the wheels were turning towards a modification of the two verdicts against Gort. When he got outside, he looked back at the enormous bulk of the Company Headquarters with more affection than normally he felt on his few visits to the place.

He raised his eyes from the symmetrical squares of light all over the cliff-like façade. High over everything, in the November dusk, the Company's flag and the British Civil Air Ensign flew



strongly and proudly side by side. Moved as always by the sight and meaning of flags flying, he stood for a moment staring up at them, watching the brave way they moved, fluttering taut in the wind from the north.

26 “As far as I can see . . . they blamed themselves, not the machine. Must be something to do with their individual take-off technique. That’s why they didn’t talk about it, even to themselves. If it hadn’t been for Braddock, I wouldn’t have found out *yet*. Not for sure.”

Impatiently, Dallas strummed on the top of his desk with a pencil. Opposite him, Bateson—still in uniform, just off service—had already been informed that he was now second in command of the Training Section. Dallas had been telling him how he wanted the instruction done, emphasising the need for standardisation. This fatal example of non-standardisation was being drilled home, and Bateson was listening with respectful attention.

Now he observed, “Of course, most pilots have their own ideas on the way to fly an aeroplane.”

“That’s the trouble,” Dallas said. “In future, they’ve got to fly *our* way. The way we teach them. And”—he went on grimly—“it better be the *right* way. Especially now things are expanding.”

In the last few days, a great wave had suddenly appeared to urge the Fleet forward. The Mark II Phoenix was reported already flying. Within a month, three were being delivered to the Company: six more by the Spring of next year. The Sydney Service was about to start. Preparations had already been made to extend the Route to Hong Kong and Japan. Conferences were being held to arrange by the Summer the first pure jet trans-Atlantic service. And because of all these improvements, the whole Training Section was to be reorganised and made very much larger. Apart from Bateson, more flying instructors were to be appointed. New premises had to be found for the Ground School. There was talk of building a Phoenix Ground Simulator—an

electrically controlled mock-up on which all procedures and emergencies could be practised. Training programmes for pilots who had finished their technicals had to be arranged on the two Phoenix I aircraft Atlas Aviation had promised Dallas by early December. He had already been given new offices and a secretary. And already his particular responsibility in the Airline was being referred to not as the Training Section but the Training Empire.

"None of them," Dallas went on, "was particularly keen to tell me. They hummed and ha-ed. They didn't always do it, either. Too hard on the nose-wheel, they said. Only when it was hot and they were really heavy."

"You can't blame them." Bateson suggested mildly.

"I'm *not* blaming them. Not all of them did it, anyway. Eight out of eleven. The other three copied the Book faithfully. With them, it was just luck they weren't presented with the two maximums that could get them into a ground stall."

"They might have found out——"

"Because they were younger and more adaptable?" Dallas shrugged his shoulders. "Some might. But sooner or later, if it hadn't been Gort, it would have been somebody else."

Dallas paused for a moment, thinking of the Captains in the Fleet. There were only four or five that he could call "natural" pilots among them, which was a higher percentage than normal. One of the things that had surprised him in his job was the discovery how few "natural" pilots there were. In spite of what people said, it was not inbred in the nature of man to fly. Born pilots were comparatively rare. In its own way, it was a gift, a form of genius. The others had learnt to fly, most of them thrown into it through the war, by studying and practising and copying and thinking. Now, after so many years, they flew extremely well. They were conscientious and reliable and in his opinion—because they analysed their own flying to themselves so much—on a type they knew well they were probably the safest sort of pilot. It was only when he instructed them, that he could really spot the dividing line, hardly apparent at all in the others, between the consciousness of the man and the pulsating consciousness of the machine.

"Most of them," Bateson began, "managed——" He mumbled something indistinctly about intuition and experience.

"Managed, yes! But they didn't know what they were avoiding. Take Creighton . . . a 'natural' pilot. He told me, 'I always fly by feel,' and when I pointed out to him that because of power-assisted controls and the mechanical feel mechanism, 'feel' as understood in the old days is practically non-existent, he went a bit pink and said, 'I sense what the aeroplane wants to do . . . and if I can, I let the Phoenix do it.'"

"Well, of course that's the way——"

"It isn't the way at all! Not these days, when everything happens so fast. Not with pilots brand-new to jet experience. Gort—because he came on the Fleet so late, and was then taken off, pending the Inquiry—had only done just over two and a half trips. That's all he did on his own. And when a pilot . . . no matter what his age . . . is just converted on to a new type, what does he do?"

With a certain rather curious reluctance, Bateson admitted, "Follows the Book."

"And that's why the Book's got to be right. And that's why, in the Training Section we've got to teach them to be . . . however much they dislike the term . . . Book pilots!" He paused. "See what I mean, Ralph?"

Bateson nodded an understanding agreement.

"Going to be quite a job."

Bateson nodded again.

"We'll have to tackle it together."

For the third time, Bateson nodded.

Satisfied that he'd made his point, Dallas put the pencil back on his desk, and was about to pick up a rough draft of a Training Programme he had already made when he heard the hammering start up again down the corridor. Men were working on the extension of the offices. All round him, he felt the forces of the future pulling him away from the past. Now, before he went on with his own plans, he said slowly, "One thing . . . I'll have to go out on the Route more often. Judd and I . . . we've done a lot of Phoenix flying, but most of it in England." He stopped for a moment. Then, with a sudden anger, "God . . . why the

hell didn't they tell me? Why didn't one of them at least come forward at the Inquiry?"

"Wasn't their business," Bateson said swiftly. "They were busy. Either on the Route or resting. They just thought Gort had done the same thing again. Got the nose far too high——"

Something in the sure way he said it, the sympathy and understanding in this apologia for the others, made Dallas look up sharply and study the face of his new assistant.

"But it might have happened to *them*." He watched Bateson closely for signs of his natural apprehension at so narrow an escape, as he added, "It might have happened to *you*."

"To me?"

"Yes . . . you. I didn't ask, but you were following the Book, weren't you? At maximum all-up weight on a hot night . . . might easily have happened to you."

"Oh, I don't think so——"

"Why not?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, under those conditions the Book——" Bateson stirred uncomfortably. He unfolded his arms and put them on his legs. He leaned forward a little. "To tell you the truth, I . . . er—well . . . quite honestly"—he plucked at the creases of his trousers—"I used to hold it down to the end of the runway, too."

Carefully, Miss Joyce Mitchell placed a small and slender foot into the sheerest of nylon stockings. Her neat body was already encased in a black taffeta frock, with a tight bodice and a wide full skirt. Her face was made up. Her skin, her bright red lipstick, the thin curved eyebrows were immaculate. Her hair was arranged with the most elaborate casualness. But all the same, she was frowning. She kept looking at the diamanté oblong of a tiny watch on her wrist. Having been so careful about netting her foot, now hurriedly she pulled <sup>top</sup> strongly, too quickly, unravelling it up her leg. With an almost sinister silence, the thin gap of a ladder slid all the way up the weave. The frown turned to fury.

"Damn!" she said.

She flounced across the room to the open drawer of her dressing-table. Searching for a new pair of stockings, momentarily her fingers touched a tin box at the back. The lid flew open, disclosing a crammed muddle of broken bits of jewellery, suspender ends, buttons, pins, odd ends of ribbon. On the top was the Phoenix brooch Dallas had given her. She saw its ugly arrogant beak, the outstretched sweep of its golden wings: and immediately, with an impatient slap of her hand, she banged the lid tight shut.

This pair didn't look too bad. She took them over to the rug, the armchair and the electric fire. She started hurrying again; and yet there was no need to hurry. She was going out to dinner with a pilot she had flown with on the Route—Captain Bateson. They were to meet at a restaurant in Knightsbridge. There was still plenty of time. She did not in any case mind being late. But even so, she was conscious of the need for haste.

Long ago, Joyce Mitchell had decided that in the real sense of the word, flying got you nowhere. Whatever might drive her now, it was not the desire to hurtle to the ends of the earth at five hundred miles an hour. And just as quickly to hurtle back again. There were times when she knew that of all people on the crew, she alone was the realist.

She liked it well enough still, of course. She liked being the one girl on a crew of men. She liked the uniform and the hierarchy and the pretty charade in which she (who could often take her pick of them) was under their discipline. She liked watching the passengers' reactions to her nice soft body bending over them so solicitously. She liked the sun and the swimming and the dancing.

But lately she had become conscious that next year she would be twenty-eight.

And the knowledge was like a conscience which drained the colour out of everything until something was done to resolve it. Sometimes she felt a sense of shame gnawing away at her charm: that with all this—these legs, this figure, this face—she was still Miss Mitchell.

For months, she had had high hopes of Dallas. The casualness of his ardour she had mistaken for a deliberate spicing of brutality,

and she had been both delighted and stimulated by it. Her certainty of him had underlined all her other pleasures, so that she had enjoyed parties and dancing and flying and other men the more for her confidence that, when she chose, she might lift her finger and stretch out her hand and have him.

His defection in Ranjibad was so mortifying that she chose now to remember little of it, or of the affair that had preceded it. What she did remember, what she and Jennifer Brent, her flat mate, often mulled over together, on the occasions they coincided late at night, was her talk with Judd. The flavour of it was still sweet in her memory.

It was as though all her other dealings with Dallas had been guilty and that alone had been innocent. She was aware that to some people her action would have appeared both vicious and vindictive. But to her it still seemed natural and just. Had a similar occasion arisen, she would have done the same. Indeed, she would have felt herself less of a woman had she not.

And that made her remember Judd. She shivered to herself, delicately slipping her high-heeled shoes on. She walked back to the dressing-table to stare gravely at her reflection in the mirror.

She had been terribly wasted on Judd. For her own benefit, her lips made a little *moue* of disgust. She could see the look on his face now . . . where had he been? . . . yes, standing over there by the fireplace. He was regular in his habits, Judd. He had his baths, his meals, his sleeps. He had his hair cut and his suits cleaned and his shirts washed at just the right intervals. So much time allowed for each from his precious store of hours. Women fitted into his scheme of things, certainly, an item in the schedule, subject to revision without notice. Work and business came first, of course, and lately business seemed to have been very pressing.

Ready, completely ready, now she allowed herself to dawdle. She sat on the stool, staring down at her array of scent bottles. She considered them, finger on chin, and she admired herself considering them. What would Ralph Bateson like? Captain . . . thirty-five, just made an instructor in the Training Section . . . how did he like a girl? The familiar delicious excitement which used to spice the beginning of every affair, began to stir inside

her. She felt weak and melting with it. He was still married—but not living with his wife. A divorce was pending. No children.

This was only her second date with Bateson. It was better to keep him waiting. Her hand hovered over the bottles, before choosing something sultry and sophisticated. She took out the stopper, and dabbed the perfume slowly behind her ears and on her wrists. There!

In the end, she was fifteen minutes late. He was waiting at a table in the corner, facing the door as though to catch the very first glimpse of her.

Reassured, she smiled. She allowed him to fuss over her. She ate sparingly, and he fussed still more. He kept filling her glass, asking her if she was comfortable, if the restaurant was all right.

She regarded him with the wide open all-seeing eyes of innocence. So he was the attentive big strong type. Immediately, she was girlish and sweet and unprotected.

There was a small floor, and they danced between courses.

"I'd no idea," she said, "you were so tall!"

She clung very slightly, murmuring, "Mm, wonderful . . ." dreamily to the music.

"You're so light," he said, holding her a little away. "I can't really feel I've got you."

"But you have," she said. "You have."

In the smoky gloaming of the last few minutes of the evening, he took her hand. He played with the tips of her fingers. He said, "How long have you been flying, Joyce?"

"Let me see . . . why, nearly . . . yes, nearly five years."

"Too long. Too long for a girl."

"Oh, but I love it!" Her voice was gay. She felt gay. She had not expected—least of all from a Phoenix pilot—so much understanding of the more important things of life. The evening could not have ended more satisfactorily.

They met again sooner than either of them expected. Two days later, when she had been kicking her heels all morning doing practically nothing as Duty Stewardess in the Catering Section, after lunch she met him going towards the Administration Block. "Come and see our new office," he said.

The office was empty. After lavishing her admiration on it, she perched herself on the desk. He sat in the chair—rather lordly, his knee against the top. They chatted. He seemed in no hurry to get down to whatever work he had to do. Perhaps as an excuse, he admitted he found her “so terribly easy to talk to”.

Then he suggested that they might go out together that evening “if you’re not doing anything”.

Her face puckered up with disappointment. She shook her head. She was going round to some friends—nothing much, just drinks and a snack. But she’d promised. Then she had an idea. Her face brightened. With a sideways smile, she said, “But why not come too?”

“Me? Oh, no!”

“Do. Please.”

“They wouldn’t want me.”

“They would! They’d love you to come. Truly.”

He hesitated. “There are several things I’d better——”

“I’d be awfully disappointed.”

He said doubtfully, “If you think it’ll be all right——”

“Of course it’ll be all right! I’ll fix it up now.” She stretched her hand across the desk for the telephone. “You don’t mind, do you?”

She was posed like that when Dallas came in—elegant, her legs crossed, her head on one side, the telephone neatly fitting into the general effect, a smile on her lips, a faraway dreamy look in her eyes, far too absorbed to notice his arrival: the perfect figure off a calendar.

“I was wondering . . . do you think so? . . . Oh, good . . . who else is coming?”

There is always something imperious and commanding about someone on a telephone: something that hushes the surroundings into silence and a stillness until the call is over. As the high sweet voice went unself-consciously on, neither of the men spoke. Dallas leaned against the radiator by the window. Bateson gave a shrug and a half smile in apology, neither of which were returned.

They waited for the girl to stop.



Eventually she did. She put the receiver down. "Fine," she said. "All fixed, Ralph! Could you come round for me about eight?" She seemed at last aware of Dallas. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't see you there. I do hope I haven't been interrupting anything——"

She slid off the top of the desk. She flicked fastidiously at the skirt of her uniform. Tossing her head, she smiled at them both, and with a wiggle full of elegance and triumph she walked over to the door and departed.

But she had not gone. She did not desert them entirely. As the two men worked on a revised ground syllabus for the new Phoenix aircrew intake, the bittersweet sultriness of her perfume hung over the desk for the rest of the afternoon.

**27** "Everything's all right now." It was the standard remark. Dallas heard it from almost every Phoenix pilot that week, when he brought up the question of re-opening the Inquiry. They listened attentively. They appreciated his theory. They sympathised with Gort. And then they said those four words.

Not that they weren't willing that something should be done, so long as *they* didn't have to do anything. They would allow themselves to be concerned—but there they left it. There was more apathy than indignation. The general feeling was that Inquiries didn't do any good to anybody, least of all now to Gort.

Coming back from the roster section, where he had fixed up a trip for himself at the end of the week—the last chance he had of going out on the Route before the intensive training programme began in December—he met Captain Creighton. Again he explained his intention, and again he got the standard reaction. In addition, Creighton pointed out, "There are so many other things in it, aren't there?"

"One of which is," Dallas acidly reminded him, "you'd have to explain why you used a take-off procedure months before it was authorised."

He could not get them to realise that this ~~was~~ one of the fundamental issues on which their jobs were built. When they took to the air, they signed for ~~everything~~—the souls, the cargo, the ~~aeroplane~~, the loading, the fuel, the ~~weather~~, the serviceability. They absolved all earthbound persons. And because as a profession they accepted that fearful responsibility, when one of their number was in trouble because of it, the arms of all the others should immediately come around to protect him.

"Otherwise," he said, bitterly conscious of his own attitude at the first Inquiry, "it's too damned easy for a good Q.C. to play one pilot off against another!"

When he talked to them, he ~~was~~ aware of some of the same feeling that Manningham must have felt only a few months ago when he had tried to explain the other side of pilot error. He knew how individualistic all airline captains were, a characteristic produced by the essential loneliness of their positions. The strain of the job they did was never really—even among themselves—fully appreciated. But they knew instinctively that they could not afford to get involved too much in anything on the ground, because very soon all their concentration would be required at 50,000 feet, flying at 500 miles an hour. It wasn't so much, Dallas decided, that they didn't want to help as that they just hadn't the energy to spare: so much of it was perpetually and unconsciously mortgaged for things that might suddenly happen in the future.

He said as much to Bateson when the two of them were in his office, after one of those training trips, sandwiched between services, which would soon be a thing of the past.

Bateson said, "I thought the President had promised to do something."

"Yes, he has done."

"That's all right then. He's in a far better position than we are to appreciate the situation. And he can apply ~~pressure~~ in the right quarters. Far better leave it to him!"

It was six o'clock and the Espresso Bar was not yet crowded. In the farthest booth, leaning her head against the red leather

upholstery," Charlotte slowly stirred her coffee and waited. She was there first, settled in their favourite corner. She was almost content.

She stared at the warm pink-lit window, watching the dark shadows of the people hurrying by, listening to the stop and start and trundle of the traffic. Waiting, eyes half-closed for the moment when his now familiar silhouette would break into her consciousness out of the unending anonymous stream.

As insistently, life had hurried them on, loosening their hold upon things past, fixing their thoughts and feelings a little further on. This place had already become for them an acknowledged meeting-place. A neutral ground, unhaunted by the past, untroubled by the present.

The garish Mexican paintings grinned down at them from the wall with smiles as thin as the paint. Black and chromium, red and yellow, glass bowls, plastic spoons—everything bright and shallow, devoid of all association, pleasant or painful. The very garishness had an astringent quality upon their spirits.

It was as though they needed a place that was uncommitted. She, much more than Hugh, felt her whole being in a kind of limbo. Grief and anger seemed to be slipping away, and sometimes she would find herself casting around for them, partly in an upsurge of guilt, partly because their recession left her chilled and unsupported.

But at other times, pain and grief would surprise her. Stabbing like a fatal illness which allowed her days of health in which to believe herself cured. Starting up suddenly at the sound of a man's voice, at a chance remark, the smell of a cigar, sometimes for no apparent reason whatever.

The thin hands of the clock moved down together. The glass door swung open more often. The air warmed and moistened. An almost continuous murmur of voices drowned the outside sounds. Impersonally, as though she and her interest were invisible, she watched the thickening of duffle coats and sweaters and slacks.

But everything seemed a long way away, as though she saw and tasted and heard and smelled through a thin translucent film. And then she saw Hugh Dallas in the doorway, the familiar

walk, the poise of his head. He came straight towards her, smiling, tucking his uniform cap under his arm. And unreality faded. The smell of coffee and hot milk, the cacophony of voices, the hiss and wheeze of the Espresso machine seemed to burst in on her. As he sat down on the bench opposite, she was enveloped in warmth and well-being.

"Sorry I'm late. Have you been here long?" He began rubbing his hands, patting his pockets for cigarettes and matches, laying them carefully on the table.

"No, not very. Anyway I didn't mind . . ." She laughed. "I'd been watching that odd-looking couple over there by the door." She hadn't seen them before, but she was full now of awareness, longing for gaiety. Something about him, something in the tone of his voice, knocked ominously at her pleasure.

He took off his coat and hung it over the seat. The tang of the cold air outside still clung to his clothes and his skin. He walked over to the bar to get their coffee. She watched the economical grace of his movements, his curious watchful stillness.

When he came back, he said almost wistfully, "You look so lovely, Charlotte. Is that a new dress?" And when she nodded: "For me?"

His eyes moved over her. But behind them, she was conscious of shadow.

"We had a quiet day," she said. "Dr. Dawes was up in Manchester. I . . ." She searched for something of her day to offer him. "I saw Bill at lunch-time. We had a sandwich together. He said—"

But what had he said? Nothing of importance or amusement. Nothing that she remembered. Her voice trailed away. She sipped her coffee. Lately it seemed that with an unconscious courtesy Hugh had allowed her to set the tone of their evenings. Holding back his own feelings, in deference to hers. But not so much tonight. He leaned across the table to her, hunching his shoulders a little. "Charlotte." A brief smile of reassuring sweetness. Then impersonally: "I've been meaning to tell you. I'm trying to get your father's Inquiry re-opened."

The familiar stab of grief rose up inside her, darkening her eyes. Then the sustaining spurt of anger. "And have you?"

Dallas tightened his mouth. The full lips narrowed. His eyes moved over her face, dispassionately assessing. As if wondering how much he should tell her, and in what way.

"I'd say I had some success. Just what, I wouldn't know. But I'll say *this*. I'm convinced. I know as far as I'll ever know anything that he can't be blamed." He lowered his voice. "If that's of any comfort to you. Is it, Charlotte?"

He put out his hand and touched her fingers, interlocking them with his. She drew his hand over to her, covering it with her free one.

"But I've seen all the pilots. I've tried to get them to call for a re-opening. But they're odd bods, you know, Charlotte. Pilots are odd. They're working on their own all the time. And what's happened *has* happened. So long as it wasn't to them . . . they're sorry and all that . . . but they can bear it. And they can forget it, too. And they've got other things on their minds. And"—he looked levelly at Charlotte—"they feel that whatever happens now they can't hurt or help George Gort."

She said nothing, keeping her eyes away from him, riding out the storm of her anger, staring down at his hand held in hers as though it alone retained stability.

Then the feeling was gone, sucked down out of her. "Yes, I understand."

"Some days ago now, I went to see the President——" He held his head a little on one side as though coaxing her interest. He leaned forward and seeing her cup was empty said, "Look, Charlotte . . . would you rather go? Let's go and have dinner. Something like that?"

But she shook her head. "Tell me first what he said."

"It's difficult to say exactly. He didn't agree. And he didn't disagree." A faint glimmer of humour came into his eyes. "He's a good President, Charlotte. He wouldn't commit himself."

She took out a packet of cigarettes and gave him one. When he lit hers, she puffed on it quickly.

"But in the end, he promised he'd do *something*." Dallas gestured with his hand. "And that's as far as I got. But he did honestly give me the impression that he meant it."

After a long time, Charlotte said, "But they know it wasn't his fault."

"Oh, they *must*." He flicked the ash off his cigarette. "It's obvious now." He paused. "Whether they'll admit it or not is another matter."

"Because of publicity?"

"Oh Lord, Charlotte . . . because of lots of things! Things I know and things I don't know . . . wheels within wheels, money, influence, prestige, and maybe even because they honestly think that things are best left as they are." He rubbed his forehead in a tired gesture and half smiled. "There it is, Charlotte! But I won't give up, that I promise . . . anyway, I couldn't. Not as long as you wanted to go on."

Suddenly he was conscious of the heat and the noise and the crowd around. "Are you ready now?"

He helped her on with her coat, touching the back of her neck with his fingers, then taking her hand and leading her down the long room and out into the street.

The sudden damp cold pinched their faces. She huddled herself inside her coat. He took her arm, and hurried her along. Walking down the smaller streets, her eyes were soothed by greys and blacks and whites. The pavements glistened. There were a few stars. Street lamps shone down, acid white. Anger was draining away now in a fast smooth torrent. She felt spent and hollow.

Freed from blame, the memory of her father softened into a gentle melancholy, no longer hammering at her mind. His rightness was known—to Dallas, to the pilots, to the President. It was as though she had for so long been bearing the burden of his responsibility, and now she felt lighter, younger again.

She saw him glance down sideways at her. "Anyway, Hugh——"

She stopped, touching his arm. Half-formed sentences jumbled in her mind, but they were gone before her tongue could form them. "Thank you," she said, conscious as she said them that the words were wrong, stilted, jarring.

He shook his head, half smiling, and put his arm round her shoulders. She stared back up at him, afraid to speak, watching

his eyes. A silence held them which the hurrying figures of passers by, the hiss and squeal of a car's tyres seemed to guard rather than break. The moment was a bubble, fragile, rainbow-coloured, almost spent.

"Charlotte..." He was peering down at her face. Uncertain, eager, feeling the way carefully along the unknown path to one another. "I told you . . . I'm going on the Route tomorrow. I'll be away a week."

"Yes." Dismay edged the quietness of her voice. Wariness, even gentleness, seemed to drop away. His arm on her shoulder tightened. He brought his mouth down suddenly, almost angrily on to hers. She felt the cool damp of the rain on his cheeks. With a sigh, she stood on tiptoe, letting her head rest against him. His lips moved now roughly, now softly against her own. She slid her arms further around him with the need to hold him a little while before he went. A new sorrow, born of her knowledge of this life and its partings shot like metal through the bright fabric of her joy. But the love was all new, untried, of infinite wonder.

And it encompassed her.

**28** On either side of the road, the shadowy shapes of houses loomed out of a thick mist, as Dallas drove out to take the Singapore Service next day. The tyres slipped, skidded a little on the wet grey surface. Car side-lights moved muzzily towards him, before disappearing. The ghosts of a few brown leaves still clung to the branches of the trees.

Nearer London Airport, it thinned. The visibility was now perhaps half a mile. He measured it automatically: how many neon street-lamps he could see ahead. Good enough for take-off—that was something. He had already been thinking of the possibility of a delay.

He parked the car in the patch of ground reserved for Empire Airways aircrew. But he did not go immediately to join his crew in Operations. Instead, he went to the new offices for a last

minute check that everything was under control, for his short absence from the Training empire.

When he arrived, Bateson was already efficiently installed behind the desk. He said "Hello," put his bag and brief-case beside the door, and asked, "Found your way around, have you? Know where everything is? Files, reports, manuals?"

Bateson gave a smiling, confident nod. "All weighed up."

"Good." Rubbing his hands, Dallas came over and sat on the edge of the desk. The hem of his dark blue uniform greatcoat swayed round his legs. "Don't expect anything much to happen before I get back. But if there's anything you want to know . . . there's always Judd." He studied the other man a shade anxiously. "You don't mind me pushing off?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"I want to get a trip in. Probably my last for months . . . once the intensive Training programme starts."

Bateson nodded his head in complete understanding. "Of course." And then, as though perhaps to reassure Dallas that he could be left perfectly safely to cope, he went on, "I've dealt with all the letters." He paused. "Except this one. I don't know what you want me to do with this one. It's from the President."

Dallas put out his hand immediately to take it. As he saw the expensive crested notepaper, the immaculate typing, his heart gave a leap upwards. Anticipation and excitement took hold of him. His imagination raced. All sorts of visions of uncompromising action, of a determined stand for the truth—the whole truth—flashed momentarily through his mind. Here at last, where the pilots had not realised the implications and importance of his bid to clear Gort's name, was the promised help which could be far more effective and far-reaching.

He bent his head. Aware of Bateson's eyes watching him, purposely he exaggerated the usual cool dispassion on the mask of his face. But very slightly, as it held the letter, his right hand shook. He read:

My dear Dallas,

I have given a great deal of serious thought to what you



told me last Monday fortnight, and I have discussed the matter at length with very many people. Your theory, though interesting, is not supported by fact, and you will be the first to admit that there is very much more in it than that. Our good friends, the Atlas Aviation Company, know very much more about such matters than either you or I do. They are naturally extremely concerned to prevent an excessive nose high attitude developing in the Phoenix I, and by this new take-off technique they have now made it virtually impossible. This, of course, could not be authorised without exhaustive tests, and now that it has been introduced, you will agree that a big step forward has been made. Somewhat unorthodox it may be, and a trifle noisy, but the new technique has made the Phoenix I take-off satisfactory under all conditions of weight and temperature. And we have reason to believe the Phoenix II performance on take-off will be considerably better.

However, do not be misled into thinking that I am overlooking the question of Captain Gort. I promised you that something would be done, and I do not intend to go back on that promise.

You will perhaps recall that after the first Phoenix accident, Captain Gort was severely reprimanded by the Board. Bearing in mind his thirty-one years of flying, that reprimand I have today ordered to be struck from his records. He had a long and praiseworthy service in aviation, and now there remains on it no blemish whatever, but only commendation. I feel that this gesture is a fitting and just close to a gallant career, and one which he himself would have appreciated.

Dallas stared down at it, saying nothing. He knew that this was the knell to any hopes of help from that quarter. This wall, too—the last brick wall—was only making the pretence of giving way. A line through a sentence of a dead man's documents: that was all. Officially and publicly, Gort was to be left to carry the sole responsibility.

He looked up. He said curtly, "No need for you to deal with this one. I'll deal with it myself."

Then slowly and deliberately, with no visible passion or feeling,

he tore the letter carefully into small shreds, and dropped them into the waste-paper basket beside the desk.

Bateson said almost reproachfully, "When you come to think of it . . . nothing else he could do. He's at least done *something*."

"If you call that anything."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments. Then Bateson asked, "What are you going to do?" And then, not waiting for an answer, as though in any case the question was a rhetorical one, he went on to provide his explanation for everything: "We're so busy. So *damned* busy!"

And as though to confirm his remark, the secretary came in: a request by the Ground School for a conference about changes in the syllabus: Atlas Aviation had rung up to confirm that two aircraft would be available for the Training Section as from the first of December: and the news that the Phoenix II had landed at London after a three hour test flight, because of fog at Hunnington, and was now on the tarmac. Dallas, hearing her, had a curious sensation of being stepped up in time. They were living in the future: the present was their past: their past was as shadowy and unreal and far away as the future is to others. The trouble was, in this business, everyone had to work so fast, to go on forward at such speed. Pickering's words, *who is the right person*, now came flashing back into his memory, Gort couldn't be blamed, he knew that. But in all fairness, nor could Pickering. Nor could the President. Nor could the pilots. Already, even in himself, he felt the struggle to preserve from obscurity in his mind the vision of those two crashes. Already the dark mist was settling over the life of George Gort.

There were so many other things to do. His service, for instance—

He looked at his watch. Long past time when he should have been in Operations. He said goodbye to Bateson, received in exchange the eternal "Have a good trip," then he took up his bag and brief-case, and humped them across the road to where their transport was waiting.

He put his bag with the others at the back of the crew car, and went into the office. They were up to a heavy all-up weight. On this trip, they were to go via Zurich, which was soon to be

an additional stop. The Flight Plan had already been done—2 hours 5 minutes—but he waited till he had gone over with the First Officer to check the weather with the Met men before signing it. He read the latest orders, noticed in large letters the most recent and most important one—about the new take-off procedure—signed by Judd. Then, obeying it, he looked up the Book for the unstick speed: 112 knots at this temperature, and he added the required eight knots to make it 120.

The crew car took them out to their aircraft, now standing waiting for them on the Departure Ramp. Dallas told his First Officer to do the Before Starting Engine Check List, and walked over alone to the Landing Office to sign the Load Sheet. Then to Customs to sign the clearances and the outgoing papers.

It was on his way back to the aircraft that he saw it. With so much to think about, he had forgotten what his secretary had said. At first, as he caught sight of it, he thought they had moved his own Phoenix.

And then he saw it was different.

It was larger, for one thing. In the grey November morning, with mist and smoke swirling over the wet tarmac, there it stood, a little to one side of the other aircraft: huge, its silver skin misted over with moisture, an admiring crowd all round, looking up at it, while heads turned as various little crocodiles of passengers walked out to their different aircraft.

Curious, Dallas went across. Though he had seen drawings of it, he was conscious that this wasn't quite the same. The nose was going to stick out more, he knew that: and he could see now that it was longer and slimmer. But something had been altered. This shape wasn't quite what he expected. And as he got nearer, he suddenly realised why the general effect was so changed.

Pickering's giant triangular wing had gone.

Dallas stood near the port outboard engine pod, his head back on his shoulders, looking upwards. Now he was so close, he could see how the beautiful natural shape of the Phoenix had been spoiled. No doubt about it, this wing was a last-minute modification: the leading edge had been added to, so that it gave the appearance almost of having a patch upon it. It was longer. It

was wider. And instead of that perfect triangle, it was now an odd pentagonal, with blunt square tips in place of those two fine-pointed angles. Obviously, the whole purpose was to give better lift on take-off—a bigger margin in all temperature conditions between unstick and stall.

For a few minutes, he stayed there, remembering all the happenings of the past six months that had contributed so much to this metal future that towered above his head. Here then was a newer and more efficient Phoenix rising out of the ashes of the old: product of the everlasting Phoenix in man himself, the male urge to move and keep moving—not to be denied, ruthless, not to be held back by the female stillness of the nest.

Dallas turned. Again, he became conscious of time. Looking across the tarmac, he saw a long line of passengers mounting his aircraft. In a few minutes he would be scheduled off the chocks. He started to walk slowly away from this new aeroplane, back to his Phoenix I.

At the bottom of the steps, he waited till all the passengers were on board, and then went up into the cabin himself. He said, "Excuse me," as he threaded his way expertly, holding his brief-case, through the passengers in the aisle as they settled themselves into their bright blue and cushioned surroundings. He opened the door to the Flight Deck and went through.

The First Officer had already finished the checks. Within three minutes, all the jets were alight. Dallas waved the chocks away, and at the familiar racing speed, the Phoenix taxied out to the end of the long runway.

There, they had to wait. In the queue, two other aircraft were in front of them. All round, the surroundings were of a damp opaqueness, except where the blurred yellow blobs of lights stretched half way down the runway, till they too disappeared, drowned in the watery visibility. There was no horizon. No trees. The Terminal buildings, the gigantic hangars had gone. First one aircraft left. Then the other. Alone now in this grey world, the Phoenix moved forward to the take-off position.

Dallas said to the First Officer beside him, "Have you tried this new take-off technique?"

"Yes, sir." The Phoenix moved forward in for a hell of a long time. Dallas said nothing. The Phoenix moved forward the stops. The release of the Phoenix moved.

One by one, the blurred runway lights flashed by, faster and faster than the one before. As they rolled forward, more lights hidden before, came out of the weeping visibility to help them. The speed crept up: 75—85—95 knots. Still Dallas kept the attitude of the aircraft level with the runway. But now, the nose oleo-leg began vibrating. On their mountings, the instrument panels shook. At 105 knots, the cockpit jaded and juddered. The whole nose swung slightly, shivering from side to side, as on and on they pounded towards the end of the runway. And above the roar of the jet engines came the discordant banging of the nose-wheel, protesting against this harsh treatment, asking to be off the ground, screaming out the requiem of George Gost. The speed mounted. Gradually the aircraft became alive. The needle on the indicator swung past 112, past 115, past 118, till it touched 120—

The rattling stopped. The Phoenix was airborne.



